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Faith in Action for Social Justice

Diving In?



**A Christian feminist on the
dangerous waters of baptism.**

by Natalie Wigg-Stevenson

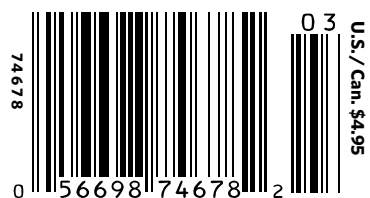
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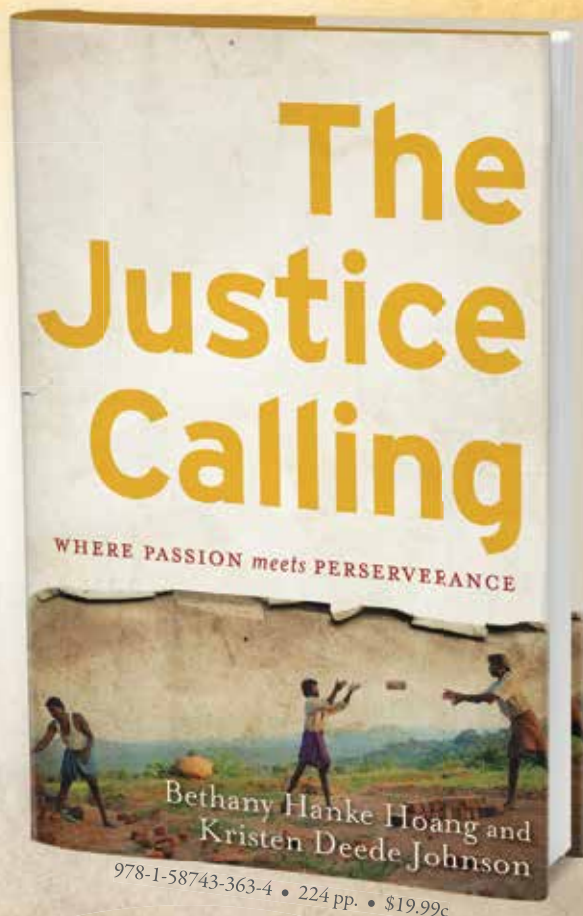


PERSEVERANCE in the Pursuit of JUSTICE

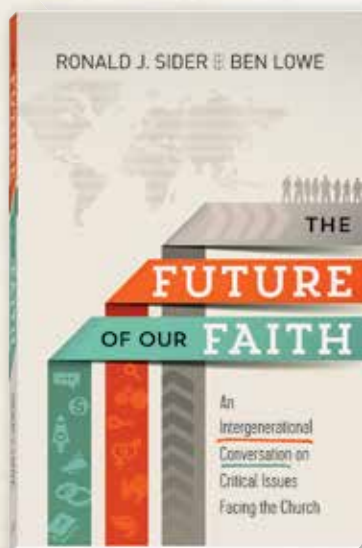
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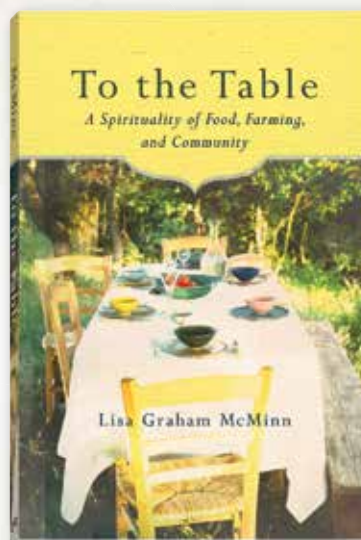
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Are you a SOJOURNER?

With headlines of racial conflict, unjust criminal justice systems, and pervasive economic inequality surrounding us every day, **it's clear that our communities need change.**

Sojourners president Jim Wallis just released a book that we hope can help change the conversation around one of the most fundamental and systemic injustices we face today as a country and in our communities. It's called *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America*.

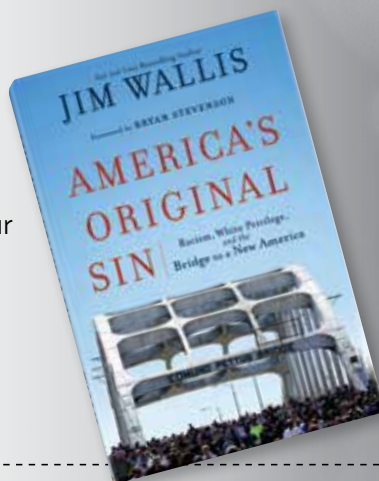
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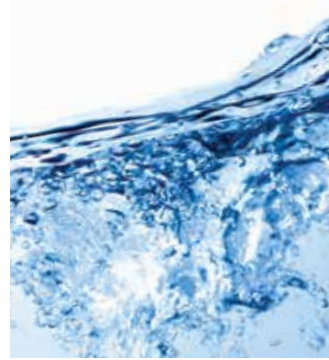
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TWO-YEAR-OLD Georgia Wigg-Stevenson—the daughter of *Sojourners* contributing editor Tyler Wigg-Stevenson and Emmanuel College assistant professor Natalie Wigg-Stevenson—was by far the youngest attendee at the Summit we hosted last summer. While the adults around her struggled to process news that nine people had just been shot in a Charleston, S.C. church, Georgia's presence offered a visible sign of innocence, hope, and solace in the midst of our grief and outrage.

In our cover story, Natalie tells the story of how she wrestled with the decision to baptize Georgia. A self-described “card-carrying feminist theologian, Baptist minister mama,” Natalie felt the baptismal liturgy—and the exclusively masculine language

for God it required—smacked of patriarchy. “My daughter’s entry to the church necessitated the erasure of her birth from a woman,” writes Natalie, “to instead be rebirthed by a Father, Son, and, at best, non-gendered—but usually also masculine—Spirit.”

Yet Natalie also knew that by baptizing her daughter into the church, she wasn’t only baptizing her into a “worldwide communion” still compromised by “insidious” misogyny, but also a community that often remains complicit with other forms of oppression, including



colonialism, racism, and heteronormativity. “I struggled with adding one more soul to a worldwide communion of Christianity that is just as likely to hold up and sanctify my daughter’s ethnic and cultural privilege as it is to ask her to give it up or give it away,” admits Natalie.

In the end, Natalie’s essay is part feminist theology of baptism, part reinterpretation of Nicodemus’ questions in John 3 about being “born again,” and part honest grappling with “parenting a child into the struggle of faith”—and a reflection we are wholly honored to share with you. ■

Letters

Beatitude of Rest

Brian Doyle is in good company in his article “The Final Frontier” (January 2016) when he translates “the poor in spirit” as “humble.” George Lamsa’s *Holy Bible from the Aramaic of the Peshitta* also translates Matthew 5:3 as “Blessed are the *humble*, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Going deeper, Neil Douglas Klotz, in *Prayers of the Cosmos*, tells us that the first beatitude in Aramaic is “*Tubwayhun l’meskenae b’rukh d’dilhounie malkutha d’ashmaya*.” He says the word *meskenae* invokes a solid home base or resting point, and *rukh* can be translated as spirit, breath, or soul and is related to the cosmic breath of life, *rukha d’qoodsha*, or Holy Breath. I find that when I am praying or meditating and my breath slows and deepens, I often experience a peacefulness that feels like “the kingdom of heaven.”

Arlene Jech
San Francisco, California

From Coexistence to ‘Co-resistance’

Thank you for “Hope, Postponed” (by Jim Rice, December 2015), a wonderful contribution to the discussion and clearing the air on the Israel-Palestine conflict. You have boldly addressed one of the main third-rail issues. I

We must again have a dream and prayerfully act to make it a reality.

am grateful beyond words for your clarifying the debate on the source of Palestinian resistance. You have moved us from coexistence to “co-resistance” with a contribution to better understanding, prayer, and action.

But it is my view that your last paragraph is counter to where the debate is moving. Most agree, including in Israel, that the “two state” solution is now nearly impossible, with the government of Israel controlling, with ever-more-vicious military force, 66 percent of tiny Palestine.

May the Lord strengthen the resolve of all of us who love Jews (Israelis) and Arabs (Palestinians) alike in this challenging time.

Thomas R. Getman
Washington, D.C.

Prayerful Action Needed

The most important yet understated point of Jim Wallis’ November column, “The Matthew 25 Test,” was that our politicians are not listening to “the least of these”—the citizens. As long as people of faith do not take action to

reclaim our democracy from the corrupting influence of big money, our politicians will continue to subvert the faithful citizens’ constitutional authority to be represented.

Under the current crony capitalism system, our ability as people of faith to respond appropriately to the needs of “the least of these” will continue to be overwhelmed as more Americans are pushed into poverty through lack of opportunity. Nor will our nation address climate change as solicited in the article.

The suffrage and civil rights movements would not have succeeded if not for the strong participation of faith congregations and their members. We must again have a dream and prayerfully act to make it a reality.

George Penn
Madison, Wisconsin

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BY JIM WALLIS

How Many Tears?



EARLY THIS YEAR, I was invited to the White House for an important meeting. A young couple entered at the same time I did, carrying their baby—which struck me as unusual for a meeting with leaders at the White House.

They introduced themselves and their 15-month-old daughter. Then the couple told me this: “Her 6-year-old sister was shot and killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn.”

Then I understood. They were there for the same meeting I was—President Obama’s announcement of new executive actions on background checks and other gun enforcement and safety issues. The East Room of the White House was full of the victims and family members of victims of mass shootings, which occurred 372 times in 2015, killing 475 people and wounding 1,870. (As defined by the Mass Shooting Tracker, a mass shooting is any in which four or more people are shot.)

Many families that had lost children or parents were there. Former

rights were stripped from college kids in Blacksburg and Santa Barbara, and from high-schoolers in Columbine, and from first-graders in Newtown,” he had to wipe tears away from his eyes.

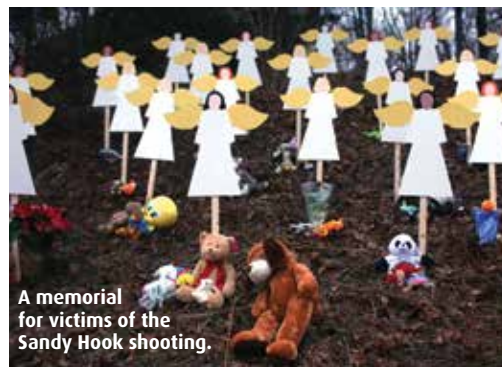
“Every time I think about those kids, it gets me mad,” Obama said. “And by the way, it happens on the streets of Chicago every day.”

I have seldom seen President Obama so emotional. I know the hardest day of his presidency was when he had to go to Newtown to meet and talk to the families of the 26 students and teachers who had lost their lives to another mass shooter. And it is clear to me that Obama was responding as a dad who has two girls of his own.

I think his emotional reaction is also partly because he feels so helpless to do the things that will matter to save these lives. At that meeting in early January, President Obama announced limited executive actions within his authority—such as working to narrow or close background check loopholes, hiring more ATF agents, increasing funding for mental health treatment, and supporting gun safety technology—all of which will save some lives.

But there is so much more our country could do—except we haven’t yet been able to, because the gun lobby blocks any meaningful legislation from getting through Congress. Real, long-term changes will have to go through Congress, but few believe Congress will act.

THE COUPLE I MET ended the story about their slain daughter with these words, “And nothing has been done by Congress to stop this.”



A memorial for victims of the Sandy Hook shooting.

Getty Images

Sitting in that room, watching a president with tears in his eyes and seeing the tears of so many victims’ families, I asked myself: What can churches do—what can be done by Christians, who say every life is sacred, Jesus’ followers whom he called to be peacemakers?

Passing common sense gun and gun-safety regulations feels like a lost political cause in this country these days, even though most Americans—even most gun owners—support such measures and they clearly have saved lives all over the world.

But aren’t Christians supposed to support “lost causes” and change them? Haven’t we done that throughout our history? A president in tears because he feels so helpless and a room full of families who have lost their dearest loved ones made me say to myself: It is time for Christians to stop, pray, sit down together, and talk, and ask the Lord what we are called to do.

I pray that as we go forward in 2016, a year during which it’s likely that another 30,000 people in this country will lose their lives to gun violence, we find the courage to join together in this critical task of discernment, which must then lead to action. ■

Jim Wallis is editor-in-chief of Sojourners magazine.

“Every time I think about those kids, it gets me mad.”

member of Congress Gabby Giffords and her husband, Mark Kelly, were there. Many remember the 2011 shooting in Tucson, Ariz., in which a man suffering from paranoid schizophrenia shot 19 people, including Rep. Giffords, six of whom were killed, including a 9-year-old girl.

IT WAS THE PEOPLE and the faces that most moved me—and moved the president. Much was made the next day of his emotional response. When he said, “Our unalienable right to life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness—those

Justin Norman



Justice Detained

Members of an interfaith delegation to Cuba—including Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and atheists—hold a drawing of Shaker Aamer, a Muslim British resident detained at Guantanamo Bay without a trial from 2002 until his release in October 2015. “My identity as a Muslim obliges me to pursue justice,” said Maha Hilal, who traveled with the delegation, “while my identity as American demands that I challenge the U.S. government’s role in the dehumanization and torture of Muslim prisoners.”

By Geoff Broughton

Guns N' Aussies

How Australians decided that gun ownership should become marginal, not mainstream.

THE LAST GUN-MURDER massacre in Australia happened in April 1996.

I remember it clearly. My wife and I were preparing to move from our home in Sydney to California, where I'd been accepted to study at Fuller Theological Seminary. After 13 years of a Labor government in Australia, Conservative John Howard had just been elected prime minister. My wife and I joked that it was a good time to leave the country. Then the Port Arthur massacre occurred—35 people were killed, 23 were wounded.

What happened next was astounding. The senior leaders of both major political parties, at both the federal and state levels, faced down opponents and enacted far-reaching and effective new gun laws.

What came to be called the National Firearms Agreement banned the importation, sale, and possession of all automatic and semi-automatic rifles and shotguns (most handguns were already illegal) and enacted a compulsory gun buy-back scheme.

The new agreement for gun ownership

allowed guns to the military, police, and those employed to shoot feral animals. The new federal laws were enacted unilaterally across state rights. Controversially in light of Second Amendment rights in the U.S., the act specifically stated “that personal protection not be regarded as a genuine reason for owning, possessing, or using a firearm.” However, genuine reasons included “sporting shooters” with valid club memberships, hunters with proof of permission, and “bona fide collectors of lawful firearms.”

The new gun laws were passed quickly, accompanied by an amnesty for any unlicensed firearms.

As we packed our bags to move to the United States, images filled the nightly television news of police stations across Australia full of firearms of varying shapes, sizes, and states of legality. These were guns that were voluntarily surrendered, in addition to those gathered through the formal buy-back program. It was more than politics. It was a national moment.

Somehow, without political coercion or public commentary, Australians decided that gun ownership should become marginal, not mainstream. The legislation merely reflected the national mood: Only soldiers, cops, and farmers needed to own guns. The mythos of the historical outlaw-hero, like bushranger Ned Kelly, remained. However, like Kelly, gun ownership was now part of Australia's past, not our future.

Shortly before boarding our flight to the California, I suggested to my father that an old shotgun the family possessed—passed down through three generations, but rarely fired in more than 50 years—might be surrendered during the amnesty. I was too late. He had already handed it in a month earlier, without consultation—even though the gun really belonged to me as the firstborn son! My momentary indignation passed and I've thought rarely about my forfeited birthright since.

Since my wife and I returned to Australia in 1998, I have worked as an Anglican priest

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The mission of *Sojourners* magazine is to inspire hope and action by articulating the biblical call to racial and social justice, life and peace, and environmental stewardship.

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in Sydney's inner-city neighborhoods. Alternatives to violence, I've learned, are often more popular with street-involved people than with my educated, middle-class peers. From the streets I've gained perspective about the justice of Jesus Christ: a justice that reconciles, a justice that renounces retaliation, a justice with repentance, and a justice with repair.

The Port Arthur massacre changed Australia. My teenage children are spared the horrific gun violence experienced in the U.S. "I feel free because we are not always in lockdown, worried about people coming into the school," Nick, age 14, told me. Anna,

age 12, said the freedom to go unafraid to the local park with friends was an important difference between growing up in Australia vs. the U.S.

In Australia, we will continue to pray for you in America: for courageous politics, for a "national moment," for Americans to decide that gun ownership should be marginal, not mainstream. ■

Geoff Broughton, author of Restorative Christ: Jesus, Justice, and Discipleship, is a lecturer in practical theology for Charles Sturt University and rector of Paddington Anglican Church in Sydney.

By Polly Jones

MegaTrade vs. People Who Make Things

New megaregional trade deals are lighting up the global economy—and justice movements for labor rights are mirroring them.

IN MID-DECEMBER, trade talks involving almost every country in the world closed in Nairobi. Did anyone hear the door slam?

Previous negotiations of the World Trade Organization (WTO) have been sites of furious protest and resistance by tens of thousands of people, including small farmers, trade unionists, anti-globalization activists, and faith and development organizations. (The 1999 negotiations were called the "battle in Seattle" for good reason.)

While the Nairobi meetings held some similarities to previous WTO negotiations—fears that no agreement would be reached and entrenched positions by the global North and South—other aspects were entirely different, including the way civil society is organized for engagement.

In the last two years, we have witnessed the rise of megaregional trade deals. The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (T-TIP) between the U.S. and the European Union is one example, but there are many others under negotiation. The Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement between Canada and the E.U. has been finalized and the text is awaiting parliamentary agreements some time in 2016. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) between the U.S. and many Pacific Rim countries was agreed upon in October 2015 and is waiting for governments to ratify it.

The Trade In Services Agreement is in its 15th round of negotiations involving more than 50 countries.

These deals have many similarities. They are designed to open up new markets for global corporations and create the conditions for them to be as lucrative as possible. Perceived "barriers" to trade, such as fair labor standards, food safety regulations, and publicly provided services, are to be reduced or removed.

Additional legal protections to safeguard corporate profits from the effects of national government policies (such as raising the minimum wage or introducing plain-packaging on tobacco products) will be introduced. And, of course, the negotiations are held in secret, away from democratic scrutiny.

The rise of these megaregional trade deals is a direct response by neoliberal or "free market" capitalist governments that have become frustrated with the impasse in negotiations at the WTO. For more than 15 years, the WTO has failed to make progress on the 2001 Doha Round negotiations. Unable to secure agreement of the 162 countries that make up the WTO, the European Union, the U.S., Australia, and others decided to set their own agenda. They began negotiating the sort of neoliberal trade deals they wanted directly with other willing countries. The countries

From the Archives

March 1977

The Myth of Progress

Where do most radical thinkers stand on belief in human progress? In fact, they have not rejected it; they want to speed it up. The commitment to creating the Kingdom of Humanity, in a radicalized form, still undergirds the condemnation of capitalism. Almost all social readings are permeated with the unstated premise that our age is an improvement over all others. ... So what? What is wrong with the conviction that we are actively working with history to build the best of all possible worlds? If nothing else, I think it leads to a distorted reading of the past and a misleading analysis of the present. ... The danger comes in where there is a confusion of God's ways with our ways—a confusion that is always suicidal for theology.

When one questions progress, the defense usually is, "But would you rather have lived in the Middle Ages?" Then I remember that I am of the wrong sex and from the wrong social origin even to have asked the question. The issues are difficult and need further clarification. To me, at any rate, it is not fruitful simply to bemoan the present and glorify the past. The inverse of belief in progress need not be belief in retrogression.

The best alternative would be belief in the providence of a loving God. I suggest that we Christians turn again to careful political and theological study of the biblical revelation concerning the city of God and the city of humankind. ■

Katharine Temple was a member of a Catholic Worker house in New York when this article appeared.



that did not share this agenda—often those from the global South—were simply left out of the negotiations.

Civil society has responded to these megaregional deals by building national and regional movements of resistance that mirror the countries in the deal. For example, the campaign to stop T-TIP in Europe has coordinated protest across the 28 countries with a 3.4 million-strong petition and days of action on which many national protests take place simultaneously.

We have also found new ways of explaining the injustice in the agreements and encouraging people to take action. With the trade deals of old, our campaigns were framed as the injustice of the global North exploiting the global South. While this exploitation continues, most developing

countries are excluded from the new megaregional deals whether in the North or South. With deals such as T-TIP and TPP, we are now campaigning around the problems they create on our own doorstep. For example, the U.K.'s much-loved National Health Service, which under T-TIP could shift from delivering what is best for patients to what is cheapest for companies, is at the center of the campaign against T-TIP in the U.K.

What unites trade activists today is an analysis that global trade puts the interests of big business ahead of the needs of people and the planet, no matter whether your struggle is in Liverpool, Lucknow, or Detroit. ■

Polly Jones is head of campaigns and policy for Global Justice Now in London.

By Timothy King

Saving Seeds, Soil, and Souls

Has the plow destroyed more options for future generations than the sword?

THE PLOW. Today it is a nostalgic symbol of a nearly forgotten agrarian past. This farm tool evokes scenes of wholesome farmers who, by the sweat of their brow, churn under dark, rich soil with help from a friendly beast of burden. After scattering seeds of wheat and the blessing of good rain, those fields will become amber waves of grain. The family will celebrate another good harvest. The bread will sustain them through another winter until fields can be planted again.

Scraaatch. Wait a minute! Wes Jackson, geneticist, farmer, and author, wants to interrupt this pastoral vision. In fact, he would interpret it quite differently. He might describe a scene of environmental carnage in which an unwitting population slowly sows the seeds of our own destruction by slipping the plow blade under the living skin of a quickly failing planet. "The plow has destroyed more options for future generations than the sword," Jackson states bluntly.

Nearly half of the world's soil suitable for growing crops has disappeared since humans started tilling and planting. Today, up to 70 percent of our caloric intake comes from staple cereal crops planted in large-scale annual monocultures. A study by the National Academy of Sciences estimates that

we are losing soil 10 times faster than we can replace it. While Jackson acknowledges that over-reliance on fossil fuels is a crucial issue, he argues that "soil is more important than oil and just as nonrenewable."

In addition to the danger of soil loss, agricultural production "provides the lion's share of greenhouse-gas emissions from the food system, releasing up to 86 percent of all food-related anthropogenic greenhouse-gas emissions." The global food production system—from planting to packaging—contributes about one-third of all greenhouse-gas emissions, though this topic was not part of the recent climate negotiations in Paris.

While practices of low-till and no-till annual crops help reduce erosion and increase the availability of arable land as a carbon sink, these half-measures aren't effective enough, according to Jackson. What he proposes is nothing less than a wholesale rethinking of the fundamental tenets of agriculture.

The way for farmers to get out of this cycle of destruction is not by relying on new technologies but by exercising our ability to pay attention to the answers already present in the world around us.

Jackson's opening bid for this revolution

is Kernza, a perennial wheatgrass seed slowly developed by Jackson and teams of others for increased yields, water and nutrient-retention, and ease of harvest using existing mechanization. He hopes it will replace annual wheat. Researchers estimate that by 2050, “climate change could cause irrigated wheat yields in developing countries to drop by 13 percent, and irrigated rice could fall by 15 percent. In Africa, maize yields could drop by 10 to 20 percent.”

As Jackson says, we should farm like a prairie, not like an army. His project is based on how nature has been saving and producing dirt all along: complex ecosystems of polyculture and perennial plants. Perennials grow year after year, putting down deep roots that decrease the need for irrigation. Polycultures reduce the risks of disease associated with monoculture cropping and can form mutually supportive systems between plants above ground and microorganisms and fungi beneath.

For millions of years before humans invented the plow, the rate of soil growth far outpaced the rate of its depletion. Jackson understands “nature as measure,” capable of teaching us how to better live in a world we all share—he studies the processes that have worked for the planet in the past and determines ways humans can mimic nature in our agricultural work now. He imagines a world in which our ability to feed ourselves today does not depend on removing the capacity of future generations to do the same.

This approach is part scientific method and part theological design. Jackson says that the Judeo-Christian creation story in Genesis “described a bimodal creation: God created everything except humans, paused a while, and then went on to create us.” That pause, says Jackson, has been fundamentally important to Christianity (as well as Islam), emphasizing that humans are categorically different from other forms of life. A different reading can acknowledge a unique aspect of this story: Humans were not created first. Rather, we were an outgrowth of a creation that had already been declared good. In fact, the story tells us, we come from that very stuff Jackson is now so focused on saving—dirt. ■

Timothy King (@TMKing) writes about farming, food, and faith at his blog, Almost Home. He lives in southern New Hampshire.

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The Gift of Small Things

IT IS A SAD truth that presidential election seasons widen our divisions. The candidates seem to view veering toward the extremes as a mark of “patriotism.” That ethic gets reflected in our broader political discourse.

This is dangerous stuff in a diverse democracy. The heart of the American idea is that different groups can advance divergent interests and still collectively see themselves as one people. Princeton philosopher Jeffrey Stout puts it this way: “[Democracy] takes for granted that reasonable people will differ in their conceptions of piety, in their grounds for hope, in their ultimate concerns, and in their speculations about salvation. Yet it holds that people who differ on such matters can still exchange reasons with one another intelligibly, cooperate in crafting political arrangements that



wooden fence and invited our boys to come over and play. Our boys whooped happily and went.

This of course meant all of us adults trooped across the driveway and properly introduced ourselves to the neighbors. We collectively overheard a fascinating interfaith conversation in the backyard, our oldest son Zayd explaining that he got out of school today to celebrate Eid, a holiday that Muslims believe in because we believe in the Prophet Muhammad and the Quran. The neighbor’s oldest daughter responded that they go to school at home so they can follow a Christian curriculum because they believe in Jesus and the Bible. We adults shifted uncomfortably as we listened, knowing full well the doctrinal issues at stake. “Looks like someone learned something in religion class this week,” somebody commented, allowing nervous laughter to break out.

“How often do your kids come here?” the woman next door asked my wife.

“About once a month or so,” my wife said.

“Please send them over to play. My girls really want playmates and your boys are so sweet. Hey, I just made muffins. Can I offer you some?” she asked.

We, of course, said yes. My mother-in-law responded

that there was going to be plenty of food left over from our Eid feast; she would bring some by later.

Over the next several years, many baked goods were exchanged and a handful of interfaith conversations (mostly between the kids) were had. When Chicago experienced record-breaking cold, my father-in-law felt more comfortable leaving for an out-of-town work trip, knowing that his wife would be looked after in case of frozen pipes or a dead car battery because of the relationship with the neighbors. When the woman next door had to run out to get something from the grocery store, my mother-in-law would watch her kids for a few minutes. The common concern of caring for children of a similar age webbed together a relationship characterized by friendly conversations, neighborly niceties, and shared activities.

Years later, when my wife’s parents sold their place and moved, one of the most poignant moments was their tearful goodbye with their evangelical Christian neighbors.

It is in these small ways that a civic nation is built. ■



Eboo Patel, founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, writes about social justice from his perspective as a Muslim American of Indian heritage.

One of the most poignant moments was their tearful goodbye with their evangelical Christian neighbors.

promote justice and decency in their relations with one another, and do both of these things without compromising their integrity.”

He calls this process of relating across differences building a “civic nation.” In the pursuit of that high value, here is a personal story of building relationships across deep religious differences.

MY WIFE’S PARENTS are moderately observant Muslims. For many years, they lived in a Chicago suburb next to an evangelical Christian family who homeschooled their three girls. At first, the two families were pleasant to each other but had little contact. Things changed when, one year when my wife and I were visiting for Eid prayers, the girls next door poked their heads over the

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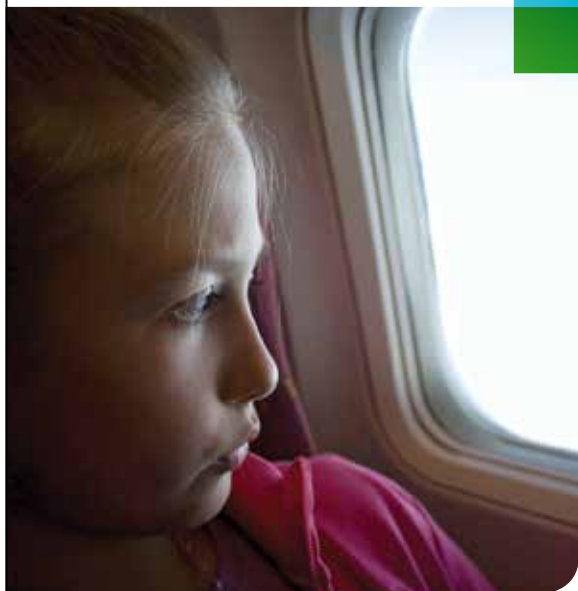
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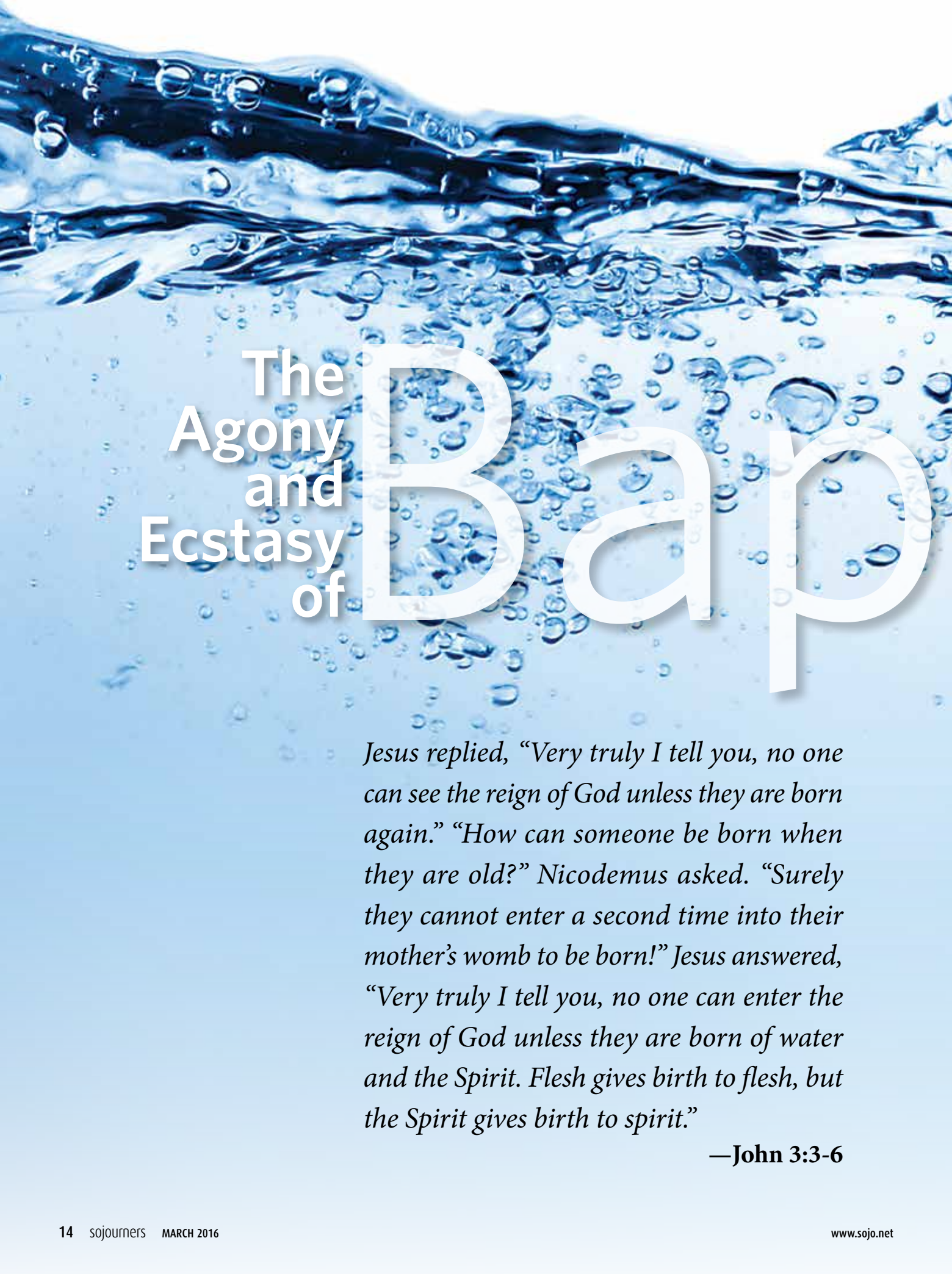
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The Agony and Ecstasy of Bap

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the reign of God unless they are born again." "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the reign of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit."

—John 3:3-6



patriarchalism

The baptism liturgy struck me as the epitome of patriarchal religion. But Jesus' words gave me hope for a feminist reinterpretation • by NATALIE WIGG-STEVENSON

IN THE WEEKS LEADING UP to my child's baptism, I wrestled with this passage from the gospel of John. While it doesn't explicitly mention baptism, most of the churches where I had worshipped over my years as a Christian nevertheless drew significantly on it when they articulated their understanding of what it is we're doing in the waters. And so, experiencing a deeply conflicted desire to raise my child—my daughter—in the church, I prayed for God's Spirit to release fresh insight from old wisdom. I was yearning to understand what it was we were about to do.

Nicodemus is almost always presented as a fool in this story. What a silly question! What a silly man, thinking that there might be any kind of a special relationship between a person's first birth and their second! I've never heard a sermon or attended a Bible study where we acknowledge that for someone hearing this brand new and seemingly nonsensical concept of being *born again*, Nicodemus' question is perhaps the most logical one to pose.

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Even more to the point, I'd never noticed before that Jesus' answer to the question doesn't dismiss the validity of a mother's labor as the very context out of which we should understand what it is that happens in baptism.

It's patriarchal theology that did that.

Now, the phrase "patriarchal theology" might be an offensive one simply to toss around. So let me just tip my hand: I'm a card-carrying feminist theologian, Baptist minister mama. From some angles I look like a jumble of contradictions, contradictions that I try to live with grace and glee.

But it's not the fact that I'm a Baptist that gave me pause on the decision of baptizing my infant daughter in the Anglican church in Toronto where our ecumenical family happens to worship. Of course, as a Baptist minister I affirm the theology of baptism as an outward expression of an inward conversion, an expression that requires one be of a certain age to be able to proclaim it. But at the same time, my ecumenical sensibilities and general disposition of theological

expansiveness mean that I simultaneously affirm a more Anglican theology of baptism—which sees God's invitation to the community of faith as occurring through a grace that precedes our awareness of it. So, being a Baptist married to an Anglican, I didn't really struggle with the idea of baptizing our daughter on account of her infancy.

Rather, I struggled to bring her to the font because the formal liturgy required solely masculine naming for the Divine. My daughter's entry to the church necessitated the erasure of her birth from a woman, to instead be re-birthed by a Father, Son, and, at best, nongendered—but usually also masculine—Spirit.

This struck me as the epitome of patriarchal religion. But Jesus' words gave me hope for a feminist reinterpretation.

Nicodemus was no fool

When Jesus extends his invitation to the reign of God, he points out that flesh gives birth to flesh, and Spirit gives birth to spirit. Historically, Christians have interpreted that

statement as if flesh and spirit are dichotomously distinguished from each other.

But as feminist theologians have been pointing out for some time now, a fully incarnational theology—not to mention a fully orthodox one—cannot diametrically oppose the two. Bodies, we point out, are inextricably animated by God's breath, God's Spirit. What's more, when we reach the end of days, God doesn't just rip souls and spirits out of lifeless forms to drag them indistinguishable up to float through the mists of Heaven. Rather, Paul tells us, Christians anticipate the mystery of a *bodily* resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:1-15, 58), a reconstitution of each unique self that is as embodied as it is mysterious.

The living, breathing, dying, and living-again reality of the Word Made Flesh testifies to this numerical mystery: In birth, in re-birth, flesh and spirit are both one and something more than one. The soul is enlashed; our bodies are ensouled.

We make a misogynist mistake, an error of patriarchal lineage, if we think



the second birth of baptism somehow erases or, worse, fixes, the terror and the beauty of the first—a type of theological mistake all too common in the history of the Christian faith. The re-birth of baptism doesn't erase the first; rather, it only makes sense in light of the first birth.

Nicodemus wasn't a fool; indeed, perhaps he was a proto-feminist who, despite all his own patriarchal conditioning, somehow by the power of the Holy Spirit could hear the deep visceral wisdom of Jesus' strange words.

And he was an inspiration to me as I prayed to understand my daughter's entry to the church through the context of her entry to this world.

Spirit and flesh

For just over 38 weeks my body grew my daughter's body, my soul grew her soul. We existed together as something between one and two creatures, contiguous, continuous, fused in spirit and flesh, sacred numeric mystery. I knew she knew I loved her because my blood carried that message into her blood. I

remember realizing how insufficient words would always be to the task of bearing that love into her very being once our spirits were no longer intertwined in our shared flesh. I remember how excited I felt when I realized that, despite the impossibly hidden nature of such loving words, I'd spend my life searching for a way to speak them nonetheless.

As the days and nights grew close to her arrival, I felt my daughter distinguishing herself from me—felt her movements from inside as a message that I wouldn't be doing this alone, but that we'd be partners in her birth together ... that soon we'd labor together to bring her into this terrifying yet beautiful world.

And then the waters broke, and we began.

Rocking, and screaming, and at one point biting (with genuine apologies to my husband for the vampiric mark I left on his neck that day), we found that rhythm and pulse of spirited, carnal life. Animalistic in the sweat and blood and shockingly unidentifiable bodily fluids, roars erupted from the gut of my existence in tongues I

As Georgia's mother, I'll want her to be whole, but as her fellow disciple I pray that her heart will be broken again and again by the brokenness around and within her.



didn't recognize. In the rocking and the roaring, I realized in fact just how close the animal is to the Divine, the thin space between the two being that indescribable place at which we transcend ourselves to some new plane of pain and existence.

Somehow my body knew when to push, not out of any knowledge from my own experience—this was my first labor—but instead as my body opened to the wisdom pouring out of ancestral mothers from across the animal kingdom and from the Mother of creation itself, God. And in that moment of opening, I felt the abyss of lifelessness—a simpler word here may be death—I felt the abyss of death in and beneath the pit of my guts as I wrenched my daughter from it.

That abyss was present and real and contained in my flesh as I and my child tamed it together.

And as she ripped forth from me (and rip she did), as the sacred math of us being somewhere between one and two became fully two—two ensouled bodies, two embodied souls—for the first time the water, the blood,

the idea of life coming directly out of death, creation out of nothing, were so true in the depths of my own being, in that pit of my gut from which she'd come, that it was like I'd never really known that truth before.

This is what it means to be born of waters and the Spirit. This is what we're doing in baptism.

We clean it all up for the ritual, of course, because we church-folk love to clean up messes. But the agony and ecstasy of childbirth are present in that moment of baptism too. We just can't see them as clearly because no one's screaming and no one's getting bit. The struggle against death for life, and the aching, screaming labor that accompanies it, are in the broken waters and mighty Spirit filling every font and tank across this broken world.

In the waters of baptism, we connect with the most elemental parts of our existence, and in those depths we see beyond a shadow of doubt how much the life of faith will entail God's labor and our own wrestling together to bring life out of death and into this world.

Parenting a child into the struggle of faith

In the end, my struggle to baptize Georgia, my daughter, wasn't only about the patriarchal theology of baptism. Yes, I struggled with the idea of baptizing her into a worldwide communion of Christianity that in various insidious ways was going to teach her over the course of a lifetime that as a girl she matters less, or that would draw lines around its capacities to celebrate whomever she loves based on her and their gender. But my struggle was also because I wondered if I wanted to be responsible for adding one more soul to the ranks of a faith that has failed again and again at its mandate to see and make manifest the reign of God on earth.

I struggled with adding one more soul to the ranks of a Christian communion that has been utterly complicit in and a beneficiary of global colonization projects that are not just facts of history, but which are ongoing reality. I struggled with adding one more soul to a worldwide communion of Christianity that is just as likely to hold up and sanctify my daughter's ethnic and cultural privilege



as it is to ask her to give it up or give it away.

I struggled with committing her to a life of faith that was just as likely to wrestle death from life as it was to wrestle life from death.

By rooting the theology of baptism in a theology of birth and orienting it toward a theology of the reign of God, we take seriously the struggle of faith to which God calls us. And we take seriously what it is to parent a child into that struggle.

It's not about driving our kids to and from youth group on Wednesday nights so that they can stay out of trouble. It's about struggling with them to recognize and partner with God's work for justice and healing all around us. Parenting a child into the struggle of faith entails being a disciple with them on the journey.

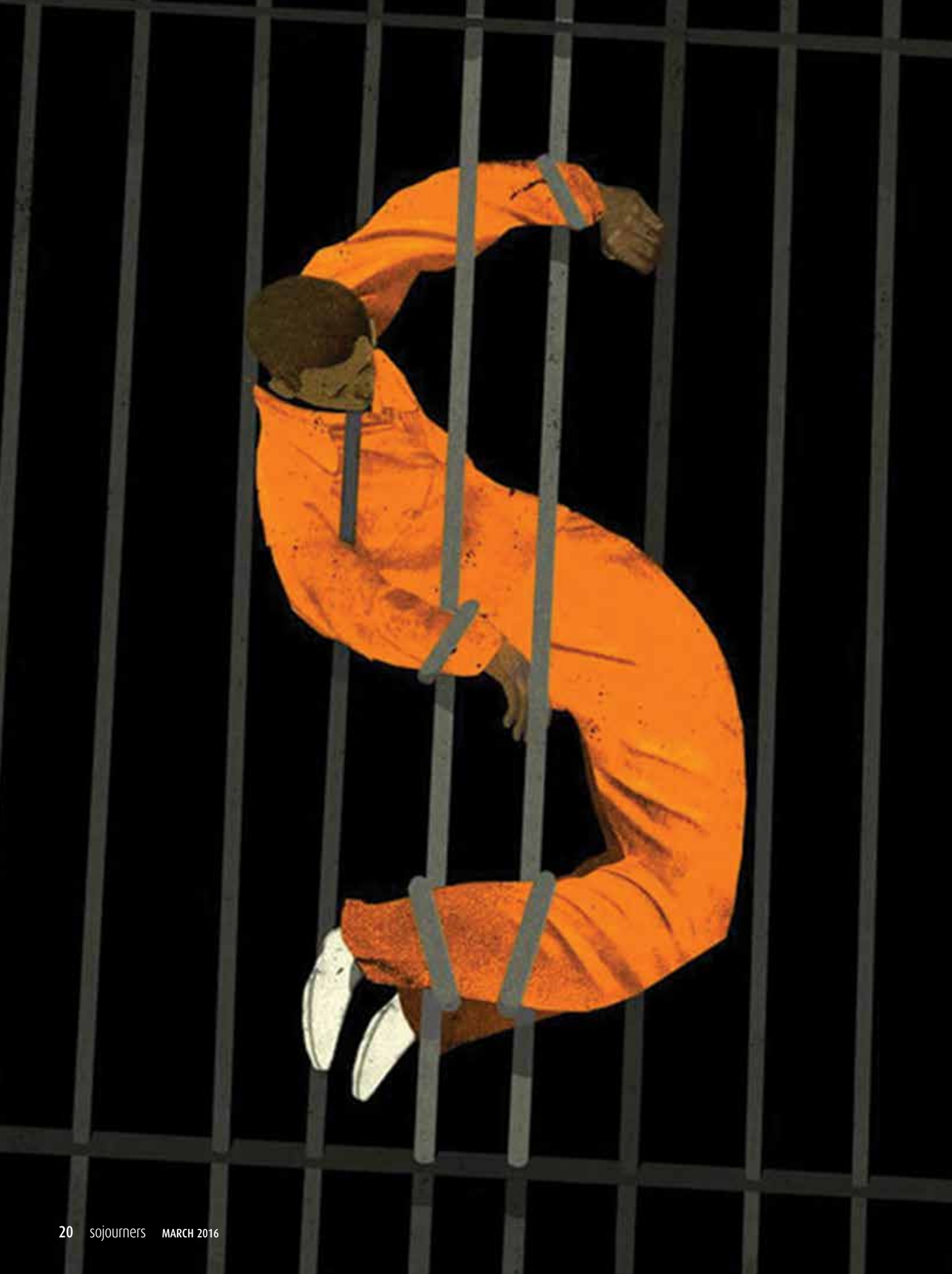
As Georgia's mother, I'll want her to be safe and comfortable. As her fellow disciple, I pray that she'll experience danger and discomfort that convicts her of the wreckage of this world and her role in it. As her mother, I'll want her to be whole, but as her fellow disciple I pray that her heart will be broken

again and again by the brokenness around and within her. As her mother, I'll want to give her the world, but as her fellow disciple I pray she'll have the courage and conviction to give it all up for just a glimpse of God's grace.

Georgia arrived vulnerable to this world on a cold December night in a downtown Toronto hospital. And she arrived vulnerable to the life of faith on a hot September morning in a downtown Toronto church. Whenever I find myself walking the few city blocks spanning the distance between these two locations, I'm reminded that the latter sacred site does not erase the sacred nature of the first. And from beneath the city streets that connect these two to each other, I hear the groans of creation itself in childbirth, laboring redemption into life (Romans 8:22). ■

*Natalie Wigg-Stevenson teaches contextual theology at Emmanuel College (Toronto) and is the author of *Ethnographic Theology: An Inquiry Into the Production of Theological Knowledge*.*

I struggled with the idea of baptizing her into a communion that in various insidious ways was going to teach her that as a girl she matters less.



Banking on Freedom

**Your retirement plan may be supporting mass incarceration.
But socially conscious investors are trying to change that.**

by **BEATRICE M. SPADACINI**

LAST JUNE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY sold all of its shares in the Corrections Corporation of America, the largest private prison corporation in the country, and in G4S, the world's largest private security firm. In doing so, Columbia became the first U.S. university to completely divest from the \$74 billion prison industry.

Though the total amount Columbia divested, roughly \$10 million, was not a major financial loss for either company, it was an important win for the students who had been pressuring the university to divest since 2013. "We work in the context of a bigger movement that seeks to break down the notion that prisons and police can solve our problems," said Asha Rosa, a student organizer with Columbia Prison Divest, part of Students Against Mass Incarceration at the university. "We aim to create a world where people understand that investing in something like a prison is a socially toxic investment."

Illustration by Brian Stauffer



Photos from Columbia Prison Divest

Above, members of Columbia Prison Divest hold protest signs at a University Senate meeting on April 2, 2015.
At right, Columbia student organizer Asha Rosa.



Other universities and nonprofits followed suit: In December 2015, the California Endowment—a private, statewide foundation that focuses on health and justice for all Californians—announced it will no longer make direct investments in companies profiting from for-profit prisons, jails, and detention centers. A few weeks later, the University of California divested \$25 million. And similar student-led divestment campaigns are underway at universities around the country, including UC Berkeley, Brown, Cornell, and the City University of New York.

For many organizations, the decision to divest from the prison industry is rooted in the organization's own mission. Divesting is about not wanting to invest "in anything that hurts the people we are trying to support," explained Maria Jobin-Leeds, a board member of the Schott Foundation and the Access Strategies Fund, two foundations committed to improving the lives of underserved communities, including communities of color. And given the disproportionate impact that mass incarceration has on people of color—in a 2015 speech, President Obama cited a "growing body of research" that shows people of color are more likely than whites to be arrested and more likely to be sentenced for similar crimes—both foundations decided to

divest. "Companies that profit from prisons make money off the poorest and are supported by a deeply racist system," said Jobin-Leeds. "We do not want to make money off this system."

Profiteers and private prisons

But despite this conviction that divesting was the right move, Jobin-Leeds and her fellow board members realized it wasn't easy to determine which investments were connected to the prison industry. One reason this was difficult was because of the overall lack of transparency within the prison industry. So while an investor could reasonably deduce that the Corrections Corporation of America manages prisons, she wouldn't necessarily know that the CCA—like many private prison management companies—has a financial incentive to keep more people in prisons. Which it does: According to a 2013 report, 65 percent of private prison contracts with state prisons regularly stipulate occupancy quotas requiring the state to make payments for empty cells—a de-facto "low-crime tax."

That investor also wouldn't know that these private companies have engaged in extensive lobbying to secure prison contracts and ensure a steady stream of prisoners. "They have put pressure on legislators to change what is criminalized and

escalate what constitutes a crime," explained Sonia Kowal, president of Zevin Asset Management, a socially responsible investment management firm. "Violations that used to be a misdemeanor are now considered felonies."

Another problem is that the link between investments and prisons isn't always so obvious. Investments in companies that profit from private prisons are often embedded in 401(k) retirement plans held in mutual funds offered by mainstream firms such as Fidelity and Schwab—and most investors don't know the specific companies included in each of these funds.

For instance, an investor might know that his money was invested through a Wells Fargo financial service company, but that investor wouldn't know that Wells Fargo has steadily increased its stake in CCA. "I don't think a lot of people have any idea of what their money is supporting," said Hassan Latif, founder of the Second Chance Center, a community organization that supports the reintegration of the formerly incarcerated in Denver. "If people actually knew, they might personally insist that their financial advisers help them divest."

Which is exactly what Jobin-Leeds' foundations decided to do. Both foundations began by identifying the top five companies that profit from the private prison system, including CCA, G4S, Providence Services Corporation, Sodexo SA, and GEO Group Inc. The foundations then instructed their investment advisers to investigate whether any of these five companies were included in the stocks, mutual funds, and bonds that comprised each foundation's portfolios—a process that required investment advisers to call the manager of every fund within the organization's portfolio.

It's a long process, and both foundations are still in the screening stage. "These requests are time consuming, and we know that we are not an easy client," said Jobin-Leeds, "but the more phone calls fund managers receive, the less inclined they will be to invest in these companies."

More felons = more "clients" (and more profit)

These related problems—the prison industrial complex and the difficulty of determining what investments were connected to it—were recently tackled by people who aren't typically thought of as economic activists: Quakers.

Though Quakers are best known for their conscientious objection to war and commitment to nonviolence, this Christian denomination has been involved in prison reform since the 1680s, when famed Quaker William Penn abolished the death penalty for all crimes except murder and emphasized that prisons should be places of rehabilitation and job training.

Today, the Quakers continue their work on prison reform through the American Friends Service Committee, a peace and justice organization focused on broad prison reforms along with immigrant rights, ending discrimination, and reallocating military spending and corporate tax breaks toward education, affordable housing, and other essential services. AFSC also has a long commitment to economic activism linked to civil rights, the anti-apartheid movement, farm worker justice, nuclear disarmament, Israeli occupation of Palestine, and anti-militarism.

So when AFSC realized it was extremely difficult for responsible investors to figure



George Zoley is founder and CEO of the GEO Group, a billion dollar corporation that profits from "occupancy quotas" in prisons. GEO Group also lobbies Congress for stricter sentencing laws, which would increase GEO's profits by increasing incarceration rates. Above, a still from the documentary *Prison Profiteers* identifies Zoley's annual salary in 2012.

out whether their money was invested in companies that profit from the U.S. prison system, they decided to take action. In November 2015, at the 26th annual Conference on Sustainable, Responsible Impact Investing—one of the largest gatherings of money managers, investment firms, and social activists in the U.S.—AFSC unveiled a free online investment screening tool that allows users to identify whether companies in their investment portfolios are directly complicit in severe violations of human rights and international law. Users can visit the site, identify whether they want to scan for investments related to Israeli

prison industry," she explained.

As an example of this complicity, Baum cited 3M, a company most folks associate with "Scotch tape and Post-It notes." But unbeknownst to most consumers—and investors—3M's second highest earning division is the "Safety and Graphics Business Segment," which provides high-tech security and surveillance products for law enforcement and correctional facilities. 3M and its subsidiaries hold numerous contracts with federal, state, and municipal prison systems. In an age of mass incarceration, for-profit companies such as 3M have a vested interest in keeping ex-felons under tight surveil-

Many investors are unaware that private companies have engaged in extensive lobbying to secure prison contracts and ensure a steady stream of prisoners.

occupation or private prisons, then enter a list of investment holdings and press "scan." The tool will automatically compare the listed investments to its database and produce a report of all the companies on the list that are involved in profiteering from private prisons. In other words, the tool makes it a lot easier to identify investments that are connected to the prison industry.

One of the main goals of the tool is to raise consumer awareness, explained Dalit Baum, AFSC's director of economic activism. And when that awareness is coupled with consumer activism, Baum believes companies will be forced to change their practices. "We think that all of these companies should be confronted publicly with dedicated campaigns that expose their complicity to the

lance; after all, more ex-felons imply more "clients"—and more profit. "This is in direct conflict to our social goal of getting people back to their families and reintegrated into their communities," explained Baum.

And this perverse business logic extends beyond prison walls. According to a 2013 Human Rights Watch report, *Profiteering from Probation*, every year U.S. courts sentence several hundred thousand people to probation and place them under the supervision of for-profit companies. Courts then require probationers to pay these companies probation fees and whatever fines they owe the courts. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, at the end of 2014 there were roughly 4.7 million adults under community supervision—approximately one

in 52 adults. Private firms such as Sentinel Offender Services and Judicial Correction Services collect fees from probationers they supervise while courts make probationers' freedom contingent on paying those fees. The lack of government oversight means that the poorest people ultimately pay the most in fees and live with the constant threat of possible incarceration.

Baum's ultimate goal for 3M—and all the other companies that profit from mass incarceration—is clear: “We must convince them to drop their electronic monitoring business and to be more transparent,” she explained. And to that end, she hopes AFSC's new tool will be helpful, especially in letting shareholders know what their money is supporting.

‘For us it’s a human rights issue’

For faith-based investors, socially responsible and “impact” investing—in other words, investments made with the intention to generate a social or environmental impact alongside a financial return—has been a way to align their investment strategies with their values. And historically, faith-based investors have been eager to avoid investing in weapons production, pornography, tobacco, or alcohol industries. But companies that own or manage prisons are often connected to military industries and are increasingly on the radar screen of faith-based investors.

“We have been concerned about private prisons for a while,” said Mark A. Regier, vice president of stewardship investing for Praxis Mutual Funds, an SRI fund offered by Everence, a leading provider of faith-based financial products in the United States and a ministry of Mennonite Church USA. “It has been our policy to monitor the military, contracting, and weapons industries; thus many companies involved in prisons are automatically excluded from our portfolios.” Though Regier prefers to use the notion of stewardship over divestment, he said private prisons are risky. “We don’t think that running prisons as for-profit enterprises aligns the right incentives and the right responsibilities with the right people. For us it is a human rights issue more than a political statement.”

In a 2012 press statement, the United Methodist Church's General Board said that “investment will not knowingly be made in

any company/corporation in which 10 percent or more of gross revenue is derived from the management or operation of federal, state, county, or municipal correctional facilities.” According to David H. Zellner, chief investment officer at Westpath Investment Management, the total market value of the shares sold at the end of 2011 was less than \$1 million and, given the small amount of proceeds made, they did not need a specific reinvestment plan.

Investing in success

Just as investing in renewable forms of energy is an alternative to investing in fossil fuels, those who want to divest from prisons can support businesses that hire or are co-owned by formerly incarcerated people, such as the Wellspring Cooperative, an upholstery company based in Massachusetts. This is what Access Strategies Fund has done as per board member Jobin-Leeds' advice. “We invest in this company and we expect a return in the next three to five years,” said Jobin-Leeds. “Although the return may not be high, 2 to 3 percent over a five-year cycle, this investment is more in line with our mission.”

Investments in these types of business can be made through community banks or microfinance initiatives. There are also publicly traded companies that hire formerly incarcerated people, but this is rarely publicized. “Ex-felons face a negative perception issue when they seek to reintegrate into society,” said Greg Peterson of Zevin Asset Management. “Yet a job is their greatest hope for successful re-entry, building a dignified life, and giving back to society.”

“Investment in empowering formerly incarcerated men and women for successful re-entry reduces public expenditures, makes family healing possible, and creates paths for transforming the formerly incarcerated into contributing citizens,” said Latif of the Second Chance Center. “Successful re-entry after incarceration can be positive for both the individual and society. It means one less prisoner to house and feed, one more person making their own way in society, and one more citizen pursuing the common good.” ■

Beatrice M. Spadacini is a freelance writer based in Silver Spring, Md. She writes about global social justice issues, human rights, and health.

Investments in companies that profit from private prisons are often embedded in retirement plans offered by mainstream firms.

Layers

I pray to pray in the ancient way—

with cross and candle,
body and blood,
an hour before dawn.

Like Jeremiah,
in his heft and sadness,
trusting the world to suffer on.

Trusting in a slow God,
bent low toward things
spent and unhappy.

I believe in layers,
spread flat and thin,
like paint across the centuries.

The press of the dead.
Their efforts and losses,
achievements and pleasures.

And what they know now.
They watch us all, covering us
in just, honest measure.

I pray to remember.

Tobin Marsh lives in south Seattle with his wife and young son, worships among Quakers, works mostly in human services, and plays in the Cascade mountains.

Photo by Ray Hems/Getty Images

THE BEATITUDES

Sojourners invited some of our favorite contemporary authors—religious and otherwise—to offer their reflections on the beatitudes. Sixth in a series.

“Blessed are
the pure in heart,
for they shall see God.”
—Matthew 5:8

The Nakedness of the Open Soul

**When Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, it was a chance to outline
a blueprint for living • by E. ETHELBERT MILLER**

OVER TIME MANY things heal. Yet I wonder how people who have lost loved ones to domestic violence or wars measure time. How long does it take to forget or forgive? I also think of the wounded who now have missing limbs or have lost their sight. Do they stay awake counting their heartbeats? How do they find the fortitude to love again?

The heart is a fragile thing, yet at times it appears to be as strong as bone. Too many of us are familiar with the broken heart. We surrender to days of quiet desperation, often unhappy with our conditions. We succumb to disappointment or accept failure. Meanwhile the world hides behind ugliness, as hatred and prejudice become a prerequisite for racism and sexism. Sickness becomes the norm when everyone suffers from the fever of despair. It's easy to say yes to indifference and for a society to become comfortable with intolerance.

When Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, it was a chance to outline a blueprint for living. Surrounded by his disciples, the message of Jesus was

one of “goodness” and the need to strengthen one's faith. There are things in the world that are difficult to explain. It's easy for one to embrace the darkness of shadows, to fail to see bright radiance of hope. Yet what defines our humanity is our capacity to love; this ability is what infuses history with moments of glitter. In many ways the 21st century will be shaped by religion and how we interpret the various sacred texts found in almost every culture. The movement of history is shaped by people.

Leadership performed by the common person requires preparation and courage. This type of leadership was on display after the tragedy at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C. We all possess the divine quality to do right, even when we might be reluctant to act upon it. Fear is in a constant battle with faith. The unknown is usually a companion to social change. As we confront days of terror and terrorism, we must not lose our moral compass. We must not compromise our hearts.

Illustration by M.P. Wiggins



Jesus placed faith and trust in his disciples, knowing they could spread his teachings. This would be possible if they opened themselves to becoming born anew. A new world is only possible if people are capable of discarding selfishness and accepting the nakedness of the open soul—hence the opportunity to be reborn with the acceptance of the Holy Spirit into one's life. Compassion and the practice of forgiveness must eventually be taught to our young people. Our new generation of activists must prepare themselves to seek higher ground, a place where politics does not exclude the poor and those in need.

To see God is the first step in knowing the meaning of life. It is ignorance that creates blindness inside the heart. The most difficult thing to accomplish in life is the ability and willingness to love another person. Divine love is unreachable if one cannot first touch the stranger with kindness and see one's neighbors as brothers and sisters.

Our social media and technology can either help improve our way of life or accelerate our descending into chaos. It can unite us to protect the common good or it can turn our face

Faith is knowing that something larger, filled with the joy of mystery, is out there somewhere.

toward a new tower of Babel and deny us the creation of a better world.

To see God is to stand as witness to God's wonder. It means one sees the wind as well as trees. The unseen is made visible. Amazing grace turns into starlight. To be blessed is to provide testimony, to speak not only truth to power but heart to mind. Love is as essential as air. Each breath requires we become mindful of God's existence. Faith is knowing that something larger, filled with the joy of mystery, is out there somewhere.

One can see God every day when good actions and deeds are performed. There is the purity of a new beginning that comes with the letting go of material things. Service

to others provides the strength to love. The heart can be as strong as bone. Blessed are the people who understand this, for their rewards will be many. They will help bring the Beloved Community into existence. They will be given back their sight. ■

E. Ethelbert Miller is editor of Poet Lore and board chair of the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, D.C. The Collected Poems of E. Ethelbert Miller is forthcoming from Willow Books (spring 2016).

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Afraid and Reaching for a Gun

AFTER MASS a few months ago, I asked a member of my parish how her search for a new apartment was going. She said, “I’m so scared where I’m living right now that I went out and bought a gun.”

I was shocked. “I hope you didn’t buy any bullets to go with it,” I quipped. She gave me an eye-roll; I gave her a hug.

Like many Americans (dare I say most)—from President Obama on over—I despair of our country ever regaining sensible gun-ownership standards.

If I had my way, society would have no guns. Period. My motto is: The only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is ... the unarmed cross of Jesus Christ.

However, I recognize that in rural areas a gun can be a tool for wildlife maintenance.

I recognize that a well-ordered society relegates certain uses of force



up eloquently in an essay last fall in *The New York Review of Books*, “First, contemporary America is full of fear. And second, fear is not a Christian habit of mind.”

Fear is a natural response to actual or perceived lack of safety. In my friend’s case, she’s a woman in her early 60s, living alone on a limited income in a rooming house. Last year, the lodgers changed. The new ones are chaotic and possibly criminal. She feels threatened in the one room she has of her own.

I admire that she acted on her own behalf to offset her fear. I despair that her church didn’t help her find safety and courage in a manner consistent with her faith.

Catholic priest Richard Rohr describes fear as a kind of demonic possession. “The only cure for possession,” he writes, “is repossession.”

Fear of this type, according to scripture, is not individual, it’s communal. There is a demonic system in place, a “devil in the corner,” that dominates through fear to thwart human liberation toward God. Driving out those demons and “repossessing” the individual and

communal soul for God is what Jesus does. It’s also part and parcel of what Catholics mean when we commit to challenge the culture of violence and encourage a culture of life.

HERE’S ONE SMALL proposal (nine months early): Every year, let’s make the second Sunday of Advent, “Sandy Hook Sunday,” a day to turn in unwanted guns and ammunition at churches across the country. Pastors might preach on fear, faith, and the theological ambiguity of gun ownership. Prayer groups may ask what makes us most afraid and “pray the devil out.” Education and family life ministers can teach about non-violent communication, reducing anxiety, and diffusing anger. Youth groups might survey the church’s neighborhood to determine who wants to rid themselves of a gun or ammunition and distribute “be not afraid” buttons.

How many guns will this get off the streets? Probably not that many. But for every gun “repossessed,” a soul is saved. ■

Rose Marie Berger, a Sojourners senior associate editor, is a Catholic peace activist and poet.

Fear is a spiritual issue, not a political one.

to the state—generally understood as police and military—for the protection of its members, especially the vulnerable.

I recognize that the U.S. Constitution has a Second Amendment—controversial as it may be—that allows for people to “keep and bear arms” (in the context of a “well-regulated militia” that was deemed “necessary to the security of a free state”). It’s a system of checks and balances built into our democracy’s operating manual.

My co-parishioner, however, didn’t buy a gun to shoot copperheads or preserve democratic principles. She bought it because she was afraid. Fear is a spiritual issue, not a political one.

Marilynne Robinson summed it





Not A Needy Person Among Them



Members of the early church shared everything they had 'in common.' Is there a lesson in that for us today?

by **RETA HALTEMAN FINGER**

AN UNUSUAL TITLE recently caught my eye at the library. The book is called *The Moral Molecule: How Trust Works*, by Paul J. Zak. An economist with obvious interests in biology, psychology, and religion, Zak's numerous experiments demonstrate that when someone is shown a sign of trust or when one's empathy is engaged, a certain molecule called oxytocin surges in the brain and blood.

"When oxytocin surges," says Zak, "people behave in ways that are kinder, more generous, more cooperative, and more caring." In other words, they follow the Golden Rule of treating others as you want to be treated. Zak eventually demonstrates how oxytocin can work within economic systems, which reminded me of a children's song we sang at a church I used to attend in Chicago: "Love is like a magic penny. Hold it tight and you won't have any. Lend it, spend it, and you'll have so many they'll fall all over the floor!"

And that reminded me of research I had done on the early Jerusalem church in the book of Acts. If there ever were oxytocin surges, it must have been at Pentecost and in the days and years of the shared economic community that followed!

Two summary texts describe the common life shared among these earliest believers: Acts 2:44-47 and 4:32-37. The first tells of their daily life together, distributing possessions, worshiping in the temple, and eating a daily communal meal

If we have grown up in comfortable, middle-class capitalism, a community of pooled possessions seems foreign—even a threat to our way of life.

Believers sold their land and gave the money to those who had need.

in various households. The second passage describes the renunciation of private ownership. Believers sold their land and homes and gave the money to the community to be distributed “as any had need” (4:35).

Why did they do this? Wasn't it impractical and more trouble than it was worth? Didn't they soon have to cope with cheaters like Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-11) or complaints from Hellenist widows (6:1-6)? Didn't that radical idealism soon peter out and people go back to their former lifestyles?

Interpreting through middle-class mirrors

My research on how these economic texts have been interpreted throughout Christian history was eye-opening. Ever since market capitalism arose in the 14th century, many commentators considered the communalism of the Jerusalem church to be unrealistic. For example, John Calvin, a 16th century community organizer, writes in his Acts commentary that he had to “properly” interpret communal sharing in 2:44 “on account of fanatical spirits who devise a *koinonia* of goods where all civil order is overturned.” He especially criticizes the Anabaptists of the time, because “they thought there was no church unless all mens’ (*sic*) goods were heaped up together, and everyone took therefrom as they chose.” Instead, Calvin recommends that “common sharing ... must be held in check.”

The rise of historical criticism during the 19th century in the West led to much skepticism about the accuracy of biblical texts. Luke wrote decades later, scholars asserted, idealizing the early church in Acts. The Jerusalem believers were very poor and had to help each other out, so Luke turns this grim picture into a Golden Age of sharing. In his 1854 commentary, Edward Zeller maintained that Acts 1 to 7 was full of legends and fictitious stories that Luke himself created.

The conservative reaction to such skepticism was to affirm the historicity of the early chapters of Acts—but to see this as a socialist experiment that soon failed and was never tried again. Its failure was confirmed by the poverty of the Jerusalem church in Acts 11:27-29, where the disciples at Antioch decided to “send relief to the believers living in Judea.”

No doubt these notions about the community of goods in Acts 2 to 6 prevail in many churches today. But both perspectives

get it wrong because scholars and laypersons alike read these texts out of their own economic situation—Western capitalism. For middle and upper-middle classes (from which most biblical scholars emerge), capitalism has worked well. As a political and economic system, it has staunchly opposed Marxist and other ideas of socialist communalism, often perceived as “godless.”

This hostility has made it almost impossible to view the socialism of the early Jerusalem church as a positive development or one that survived more than a few years. For example, G.T. Stokes’ 1903 Acts commentary in the English Expositor’s Bible series declared that the Jerusalem experiment was a socioeconomic disaster that should never have happened. One of the evils it produced, according to Stokes, was the conflict between the Hellenist and Hebrew widows in Acts 6:1. Stokes assumes they were destitute widows fighting over poor relief. Reflecting Victorian class distinctions and paternalistic attitudes, he asserts, “No classes are more suspicious and more quarrelsome than those who are in receipt of such assistance ... Managers of almshouses, asylums, and workhouses know this ... and oftentimes make bitter acquaintance with that evil spirit which burst forth even in the mother church of Jerusalem.”

Few biblical texts have been more influenced by the social status of their interpreters than those that describe a community of pooled possessions. If we have grown up in comfortable, middle-class capitalism, such an arrangement seems foreign—even a threat to our way of life. But over the past generation or so, New Testament interpreters have been using the social sciences to re-create the subsistence economies of first-century Mediterranean people. And I can assure you, it’s not market capitalism!

First-century economics

For 90 percent of ancient Mediterranean people, survival issues were foremost. Land was the most desired form of wealth in these agrarian societies. But in Palestine as elsewhere in the first century, land was gradually accumulating in the hands of fewer and fewer people. Living with just enough food for a day at a time, people had no cash reserve when drought struck. Forced to borrow at exorbitant rates from wealthy landowners, their only recourse was to hand over the

plot of ground that had been in the family for generations. That meant sharecropping on others’ land and keeping only a fraction for one’s family.

With economic survival so precarious, what prevented people from falling into destitution? Though Jewish law encouraged almsgiving, there were no organized social programs for the poor in Palestine. The single safety net was the kinship group formed by the extended family. Sociologists call it “generalized reciprocity.” This meant that you helped out family members who were struggling financially, knowing that eventually you would be repaid. Next year you might break a leg or lose your eyesight, and your kin-group would help you out. The main event binding these extended families together was the daily evening meal. Sharing bread with each other was to recognize your social equality and commit yourselves to each other’s welfare. (But pity the outsider and the stranger!)

Now imagine Jesus, a charismatic prophet who has broken ties with his own kinship group and who wanders around the countryside calling people to prepare for the coming reign of God by following him. Following this prophet is high risk. It divides families and creates individual outcasts (see Matthew 10:34-39 and Luke 12:49-53). How do such followers survive? Jesus’ disciples question him about this in Mark 10:28-30, to which Jesus replies that they will receive “a hundredfold *now in this age*—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields.”

Such an extravagant promise makes little sense until we realize that the alternative for such followers was forming a new kinship group. Anthropologists call this “fictive kinship,” a community of people bound together not necessarily by blood. The bond in this case was a common commitment to Jesus and his vision of the kingdom—or kingdom—of God. In all four gospels we learn about a community of disciples who share their lives and eat meals together, symbolizing their kinship status and social equality.

This practice of a shared table fellowship with Jesus during his lifetime prepared the way for the church after Pentecost. Underneath Luke’s account of a smooth transition, we must imagine weeks and months of organizing—absorbing those from out of



town who stayed on, setting up household groups that put all persons to work bringing in income or performing household tasks and preparing the common meals. Beggars, the disabled, out-of-town folks, and former prostitutes—all these needed to be given roles in the new community. Useful property was kept and shared, while fields such as one owned by Barnabas, which was probably in Cyprus, was sold (Acts 4:36-37).

What about those widows?

As the outlines of this fictive kin-group begin to take shape, we can now make better sense of the dispute among the widows of Acts 6:1-6. “When the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food” (6:1). This verse has been misunderstood in multiple ways: as a fight between Greeks and Jews, as helpless old women in huts waiting for a daily handout, and as proof intentional communalism doesn’t work.

However, both ethnic groups are Jews. Hellenized Jews from the diaspora have either moved back to end their lives in the Holy City or stayed on to join the Jesus-community. They are likely the minority, while native Palestinians receive more honor, especially since some had known the living Jesus.

Second, get rid of the picture of poor, helpless old women sitting in shacks waiting for their daily handouts. Because of short life expectancy, women could be widowed at any age. In addition, the term “widow” referred to *any* unattached woman in that society. This would include those whose husbands had divorced them, forcing many to beg or support themselves through prostitution. And though unattached women were usually marginalized in these patriarchal societies, Acts 4:34 clarifies that “there was not a needy person among them” because of their communal lifestyle.

Third, there was no “distribution of

food.” The Greek word in Acts 6:1 is *diakonia*, which in the context of meals means “table service.” Hellenist widows were being neglected in the “daily table service.” Since women were in charge of meal preparation and serving, it is much more likely that tensions arose as women from different cultural backgrounds worked together.

Furthermore, these were no ordinary meals but were laced with sacramental overtones (Acts 2:46-47). Even before the Last Supper (Luke 22:14-23), Luke’s gospel centers much of Jesus’ teaching and practice around meals (for example, Luke 5:27-32; 14:1-24; 19:1-10; 24:28-35). When the 12 apostles call the community together to solve the problem in Acts 6:3, they speak of two ministries—the service of the Word and the service of the Table. What an honor for these women to prepare and serve sacramental meals! No wonder the majority Hebrew widows were tempted to pull rank over the Hellenist widows. Seven Hellenist men were then chosen to even out the power imbalance. Though some of them, such as Stephen and Philip, soon shifted into preaching roles, women continued performing the sacrament of the Table.

Common meals and shared possessions did not stop with the Jerusalem community. Fictive kinship arrangements across social class lines had to continue, since they enabled believers to survive when they joined small groups whose highest allegiance was to the Lord Jesus instead of to Lord Caesar and the Roman lifestyle. Letters from Paul and other missionaries are full of admonitions to house-churches to “love (*agape*) one another,” to “extend hospitality to strangers,” to “work hard” so as to contribute to the common good and not be a burden. This is especially obvious in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, where a daily “Supper of the Lord” means that everyone

eats together and all have enough. But those details are the subject of another article.

Sharing together

A community of goods is not necessarily the right answer for all Christians today. “Socialist” programs keep many Americans from destitution through Social Security and Medicare—though we may envy Canadians their national health insurance. But in countries with weak or corrupt governments, the church sometimes functions as the strongest institution of support for needy people.

In any case, a more accurate picture of life in the early church can give us a valuable lens for examining our own lives in community. Just as the disciples received “a hundredfold” of extended family and property in the early church by sharing together, we need to explore contemporary parallels. How can believers in a church community learn not to pull rank over others? How can we practice giving up certain privileges for the sake of the larger group? How can each person, no matter how needy, learn the joy of giving to a larger goal?

And now we know that our immediate reward is a surge in oxytocin! ■

Reta Halteman Finger is an affiliate associate professor of New Testament at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Va. Some of this material is drawn from her book *Of Widows and Meals: Communal Meals in the Book of Acts* (Eerdmans 2007).

We'll Always Have Paris (but is that enough?)

The climate change conference was an important step, but progress will be marked by actions, not words.

by GRACE JI-SUN KIM

I LANDED IN Paris on Dec. 3, barely three weeks after the mass murder there of 128 people by armed extremists. On these same streets now gathered thousands from around the world—including from across the faith world—to hammer out an international agreement on climate change.

After checking in to my hotel, I made my way to the grand Notre Dame Cathedral for the ecumenical worship service organized by the Council of Christian Churches in France. While still blocks from the church, I began to hear the boisterous ringing of bells. Such joyous clanging from Notre Dame reminded the whole world that peace and hope were still possible, both on the earth and with the earth.

And the Climate Change Conference in Paris—COP 21, as it's known—offered a needed opportunity to take a key step toward peace with the earth. The window to avoid total climate disruption is closing faster than many of us imagined possible.

I stepped into Notre Dame with awe—and an awareness that this kind of work requires prayer and miracles. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would worship in such a magnificent and historic place. The church was nearly full. I sat near the back. Voices from the choirs rang through the massive stone sanctuary. On such a cold evening, their beauty touched and warmed us with poetry and power. The worldwide church was in attendance, dramatically offering its gifts back to the Creator.

'Leaders can't afford to come home empty-handed'

Before COP 21, Bill McKibben—an environmental activist, author, and Methodist (and *Sojourners* columnist)—observed, “Paris isn’t the game, it’s the scoreboard. It shows us how much we’ve done—and haven’t done—over the years since Copenhagen (COP 15 in 2009),

Photos by Ryan Rodrick Beiler

Have Paris

“Paris is not the end. Now the transformation must go on.”

Christians attend an interfaith celebration in the Basilica of St. Denis prior to the start of the COP 21 climate summit in Paris.



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when we suffered a huge defeat. There is a big enough movement now—in no small part thanks to faith communities, patriarchs, popes, and the like—that we'll see some progress in Paris. World leaders can't afford to come home empty-handed."

He was right. People of faith came to Paris from every corner of the earth. Some came as negotiators and political delegates, some as observers, and others as prophetic voices to hold political leaders accountable to the science and the moral imperative of safeguarding a living planet.

As a consequence of the November terrorist attacks, public marches for climate justice—which had been expected to draw more than 200,000 people—were cancelled by French authorities. In lieu of the marches, French activists called for a "global march" in solidarity with them. At the end of November, hundreds of thousands around the world took to the streets to make clear to the leaders headed to Paris that the whole world was watching. More than 570,000 people marched in 2,300 events in 175 countries, according to organizers, making it the biggest set of global climate change marches in history. "The charge from the streets for leaders to act on climate has been deafening, with record numbers turning out across the world," said Emma Ruby-Sachs, campaign director for Avaaz, a global civic movement.

Prioritizing the global common good

The goal of the conference was to agree on steps that would stabilize atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations at a level low enough to slow down or even reverse dangerous disruption of our climate system. U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said, "Leaders must prioritize the common good. Reducing the risks of catastrophic climate change is in the national interest of every country."

In preparation for COP 21, U.N. diplomats asked for Intended Nationally Determined Contributions, actions each country would take to hold global warming to 2 degrees Celsius or less. These are not legal documents, and only 155 countries submitted them before the conference. The good news was that, unlike previous climate

talks at this level, the biggest carbon emitters—the U.S., China, India, and several European countries—came to the table ready to deal.

The goal of COP 21 was to create a legally binding treaty. Instead of endorsing empty promises, such a treaty would commit nations to decreasing carbon emissions and promoting renewable energy sources.

Chien-Cheng Yang of the Tzu Chi Foundation, a Buddhist humanitarian organization, said that "it is absolutely imperative—for the sake of planet Earth and all life inhabiting it—that this year's COP be less about discussion and more about action." Climate change is not just a

"Where funding is channeled directly to Indigenous peoples, you witness inspirational climate adaptation strategies."

political issue, he said: "We must all do our part, by any means necessary, to reduce our carbon footprint and to reverse the damage done to our environment."

While it was significant that China and the U.S., the two biggest carbon-emitting countries, committed in November 2014 to move away from fossil fuels, the need remains for a comprehensive plan to close the climate-risk gap between the poorest nations and the richest. "We want to help developing countries find a credible pathway toward low-carbon development," said World Bank head Jim Yong Kim. But the poorest nations are powerless to influence their climate, unable to craft their own destinies without the powerful nations curtailing carbon pollution.

Religious leaders attending the conference recognized that people of faith and conscience are not doing enough to achieve

climate justice. Jayanti Kirplani, of the global spiritual organization Brahma Kumaris, called people of all faith traditions to "change our lifestyle and learn to live simply." Coal and petroleum must be left in the ground, the leaders said, to allow the shift to energy produced by wind, sun, and the tides. Bernd Nilles, secretary general of the International Alliance of Catholic



Scenes from the climate summit in Paris: From left, activists arrive, including Indigenous Peruvian leaders, and an ecumenical celebration at Notre Dame Cathedral.

funding is channeled directly to Indigenous peoples and local communities, you witness inspirational climate adaptation strategies.”

The Indigenous leaders explained that they cannot wait for government officials to make changes to save the planet. Trees are being cut down and rivers are being polluted—threatening the very existence of the people whose lives depend on a sustainable environment. The award-ees stated they are taking the fight for climate change into their own hands to stop the earth’s destruction and work toward sustainability and climate justice.

Hope as a driving force

At the end of the two-week climate summit, ministers from 195 countries adopted a framework that can help the world abandon fossil fuels this century and slow global warming. “The Paris agreement allows each delegation ... to go back home with their heads held high,” said Laurent Fabius, France’s foreign minister and president of the conference. “Our collective effort is worth more than the sum of our individual efforts.”

The U.N. secretary general celebrated the result. “We have entered a new era of global cooperation on one of the most complex issues ever to confront humanity,” Ban said. “For the first time, every country in the world has pledged to curb emissions, strengthen resilience, and join in common cause to take common climate action.” Christiana Figueres, the U.N.’s chief climate negotiator, was delighted with the agreement. “One planet, one chance to get it right, and we did it in Paris. We have made history together. ... It is an agreement of solidarity with the most vulnerable.”

Rev. Einar Tjelle of the Church of Norway also celebrated the conference results. “To finalize an agreement on joint climate policy between all 195 parties in the world, on a demanding and complex cluster of climate challenges, is a miracle!” he said. “Paris is not the end. Now the transformation must go on.”

Less words, more action

However, in order for the Paris agreement to become legally binding, it must be ratified



by 55 of the signatories. The end of fossil fuel subsidies and a global carbon pollution tax are still needed, as is massively increased investment in renewable energy sources.

Climate scientist James Hansen told the *Guardian* that until nations implement more stringent emission controls, the 1.5 and 2 degree targets are not realistic. “It’s just worthless words. There is now action, just promises. As long as fossil fuels appear to be the cheapest fuels out there, they will be continued to be burned.”

Alan Burns, a North Carolina-based climate activist, walked from Rome to Paris as part of the Fast for Climate pilgrimage. “The promises from negotiators simply acknowledged for the first time at the COP gathering that we have a crisis—but they shirked from the moral arguments,” Burns told *Sojourners*. “The voices of the masses will be needed to ensure that action promised at the national level is heeded.” Burns agrees with former international climate negotiator Yeb Sano, leader of the 1,500-kilometer pilgrimage, who said, “It will ultimately be up to the people themselves to make the changes necessary.”

What is the role of the Christian church in the movement for climate justice? “Churches and faith communities contribute to the change needed to address climate both at negotiations and at lifestyle [levels],” said Guillermo Kerber of the World Council of Churches. “Concern for vulnerable

communities, and children among them, are a key concern for churches.”

But others warned that Paris is only a milestone. “The Paris agreement marked an important step as the most significant international deal yet on climate change,” said Brian Kaylor, author of *Sacramental Politics: Religious Worship as Political Action*, but it “remains woefully far from what is needed.” Kaylor wants the strong moral and public voices of faith leaders to continue to speak so that we can “accomplish what we need to prevent the most devastating of climate impacts from destroying the homes and lives of our neighbors in the global South and East.”

Some frame the path ahead in moral terms. “The human rights to have basic needs met—food, clean water and air, health services, and more—are limited or violated by climate change already for many people in the world,” wrote WCC general secretary Olav Fykse Tveit. “Who has the right to take away the hope of a future where the next generations can enjoy life in its abundance on this planet?” ■

Grace Ji-Sun Kim, an associate professor of theology at Earlham School of Religion and the author of several books, including the forthcoming Making Peace with the Earth: Action and Advocacy for Climate Justice, attended the Paris climate conference.



By Stephanie Sandberg

Hell and the Modern Pastor

An off-Broadway play—a “kind of sermon”—portrays a crisis of faith.

.....
“Make us one,
Make us one body,
Because when we are one body,
We see something we cannot see
By ourselves ...
In the name and in the blood of Jesus,
Amen”

SO OPENS LUCAS HNATH'S PLAY *The Christians*, which premiered at the Humana Festival of New American Plays in 2014 and at Playwrights Horizons Off-Broadway in 2015. The play is described as a “kind of sermon,” sometimes literal, sometimes figurative. *The Christians* marks a distinct turning point in the history of American theater, in that its evangelical main character's struggle with ideas is treated as a serious subject that reflects on a nation's moral dilemma.

From left, Linda Powell,
Andrew Garman, Larry
Powell, and Philip Kerr
in *The Christians*.

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Juliet Vedral seeks hope
in *The Leftovers*



Religious themes are hardly a new topic for U.S. theater, but most often they've been treated negatively. Arthur Miller's plays, such as *The Crucible* and *After the Fall*, treat religion as an institution of animosity, even a kind of antagonist. Tennessee Williams uses religion as a quaint and antiquated emblem of Southern culture—such as in *The Glass Menagerie*, where the character Amanda says, with exaggerated sympathy, “You’re a Christian martyr.” Then there’s *Inherit the Wind*, by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, a dramatic treatment of the Scopes Monkey Trial that depicts Christians as hostile and uneducated. If the American theater were an accurate mimesis of American truth, Christians would be lying, narcissistic, two-faced, McCarthyist bigots.

The Christians is a completely different story, in which the dramatic action depicts

a loving, thoughtful pastor as the protagonist up against the institution of the church. Each character is treated with due reverence and given a fair argument, so that there are no easy answers, and the audience is left grappling with the central struggle. The play is reminiscent of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* (a quote from this play is *The Christians* epigraph), where a citizen who tells the truth faces the wrath of a village that turns on him. Both plays explore deep ethical issues as the central characters risk their reputations and their livelihoods through standing by their principles.

The first scene of Hnath's powerful drama is a contemporary church service,

Religious themes are hardly a new topic for U.S. theater, but most often they've been treated negatively.

highlighted by PowerPoint slides, with a sermon based on Isaiah 30:12-13: “Because you have rejected this word and relied on oppression and depended on deceit, this sin will become for you like a high wall, cracked and bulging, whose collapse comes suddenly in an instant.”

The sermon is delivered by the energetic and youthful Pastor Paul at an evangelical megachurch that could be anywhere in the United States. He goes on to describe what he views as the crack in his church's foundation, delivered with the smooth tones of a master orator who has always won the favor of the congregation. He tells a story he heard at a pastor's conference about a boy, in a country ravaged by violence, who rushes into a burning building to save a little girl and dies from his burns. Pastor Paul is tortured by this story, told to him by a missionary who mourns for the boy saying, “What a shame, I didn't save this boy for Christ ... what a shame I didn't save this boy from hell.”

Paul, deeply disturbed by the missionary's conviction, can no longer believe in such a hell. He talks to God, who replies to him as plain as any daily conversation,

Continued on Page 41

New & Noteworthy



GARMENT DISTRICT

Take an informative and engaging trip in the documentary film *The Secret Life of Your Clothes*. Presenter Ade Adepitan follows the trail of garments donated to charity to the biggest importer of secondhand clothes, Ghana, revealing the intersections of consumption culture, Ghanaian fashion, and globalization. www.bullfrogfilms.com

THE PEOPLE'S WORK

How can intercultural music and liturgy prepare us for the work of reconciliation and justice? Experienced worship leader and trainer Sandra Maria Van Opstal explores the pragmatic and profound challenges and blessings of multiethnic worship in her book *The Next Worship: Glorifying God in a Diverse World*. IVP Books

ILLUMINATED WORD

The Wisdom Commentary series from Liturgical Press, under the editorial direction of Barbara Reid, OP, is the first feminist scholarly commentary for every book of the Bible. The first four volumes—*Haggai and Malachi*; *Hebrews*; *Micah*; and *Baruch*—are out; six more are scheduled for 2016 release. wisdomcommentary.org

GOSPEL EVOLUTION

In *Evangelical Ethics: A Reader*, editors David P. Gushee and Isaac B. Sharp have selected more than a dozen writings from diverse leaders and scholars, from World War II to the present, that illuminate the roots and branches of evangelical social and political principles. Westminster John Knox Press

Vigilantes for a Lost Cause

WHEN A HASTILY organized cowboy “militia” seized a national wildlife refuge near Burns, Ore., it brought the spotlight of 24-hour-a-day media coverage to a streak of angry alienation that had been building in the West for a long time.

In fact, as *Washington Post* reporter Amber Phillips noted, the conflict has existed “since the government stopped giving away land and started actively preserving some of it.” That would have been about the time that, in 1890, the superintendent of the U.S. census declared the American frontier to be closed. Shortly thereafter, President Theodore Roosevelt began serious efforts to conserve Western land and resources. In fact, it was Roosevelt himself who, in 1908, created the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge that the militia seized.

This armed occupation of federal property was ostensibly in defense of a father and son in Harney County, Ore., who were convicted of setting fires on federal land, but the confrontation was provoked and led by visiting members of Nevada’s Bundy



Ammon Bundy talks to occupiers who took over an office at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge near Burns, Ore.

Reuters

land was not really the common heritage of a continental republic but in some real sense “their” land. Many of them depended upon it for their livelihoods. That’s what they were supposed to do when the frontier was opened. They were supposed to establish settlements, exploit the natural resources, fend off the Indigenous people, and make the West safe for the railroads.

Now we don’t need those settlers anymore, so they are being consigned to the dustbin of history, alongside all the American textile workers, shoemakers, and others who have met the fate of John Henry.

The people who took up arms against their own government in Oregon are morally inexcusable on many levels. For one thing, the vigilante idea that armed individuals have a right to execute justice is a recipe either for chaos or fascism. And the militiamen are often frankly racist and xenophobic. Back in 2014, Cliven Bundy’s media star began to fade when he started spouting bilious comments about African Americans. And a Trumpian fear of invasion from Mexico is central to the militia worldview.

However, nobody in power worried about that

racism when the nation wanted people out West to slaughter the Indians. And Cliven Bundy is also, for all his faults, a guy whose family has worked on the same land since 1877 and now thinks that his government values the survival of a desert tortoise over the way of life his ancestors created.

The problem is that, unlike the textile workers or the shoemakers, these guys have guns. And they were formed by a culture that glorifies the use of firearms to defend one’s hearth and honor. But, again, that culture was essential to the making of the U.S. as we know it. That’s why it constitutes one of the most vital and enduring streams of our popular entertainment—the Western movie.

Of course, the old patterns of land use in the West have to change. They are environmentally unsustainable, and they always were. But, as filmmaker Jean Renoir famously put it, “The terrible truth is that everyone has their reasons.” Even the cowboy militiamen. ■

Danny Duncan Collum teaches writing at Kentucky State University in Frankfort. He is the author of the novel White Boy.



We stole the land fair and square.

family who, in 2014, staged a similar armed confrontation in defense of their patriarch, Cliven Bundy, grazing cattle on federal land without a permit.

The federal government owns a great deal of the land in much of the noncoastal West. That land belongs to all of us—all 320 million of us. We stole it fair and square, either from its Indigenous inhabitants, or from Mexico, or both. But most of us never see any of that land except in the movies while, for much of the past two centuries, local loggers, ranchers, and miners had easy access to it. As a result, many people in the West came to feel that the public

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"That boy, he is standing next to me right now. And anyone who tells you otherwise, lies." The crack, it turns out, is the belief in a fire-and-brimstone hell. In a heartfelt but quiet voice, Pastor Paul says, "We are no longer a congregation that says my way is the only way."

The play is staged as a church service, complete with a choir and the pastoral staff sitting on the stage. Whether they like it or not, the audience serves as the congregation. At the performance I attended, people bowed their heads during the prayers, even speaking "Amen" after the pastor. As the scenes unfold, the choir responds, sing-



Caleb Savage, NYU Local

Playwright
Lucas Hnath

ing traditional hymns that comment on the action.

The associate pastor, Joshua, an elder who goes by Jay, and Paul's wife, Elizabeth, sit listening intently on the stage, becoming the church body that questions Paul's change of belief. In a fresh and radical manner, each character is given a genuine voice, and there is nowhere to lay any blame or judgment. One by one they confront Paul, first with the associate pastor quoting scripture after scripture, feeling betrayed over what he sees as an unwarranted shift in values. The elder, Jay, representing the church board, must ask Pastor Paul to step down. His wife, Elizabeth, is deeply conflicted, questioning his integrity and ethics and her husband's love for her. A choir member, Jenny, steps forth in an emotional testimony to challenge the pastor on how he's leading his congregation astray.

Artfully written, Hnath's play gently mirrors the wrestling with universal salvation that is happening in many churches



From *The Assassin*

FAITH FROM MANY ANGLES

AS THE Academy Awards approach, I'd like to mention some films worthy of recognition by the lights of a different set of criteria. As a member of the Arts and Faith Ecumenical Jury, I am delighted to present our list of films from 2015 that "challenge, expand, or explore" faith, including those that illuminate religion and spirituality, pointing to a more humane vision of the world.

The choices are much more diverse than the usual annual polls. Multifaith stories (Irish Catholic, Israeli Jew, Iranian Muslim, just to start), exposés of injustice and calls for restoration, exile, and return, the damage done by immature religion, and the possibility of human spiritual evolution—all are here. And the film we agree was the year's best does something profoundly important: It tells the story of a weaponized individual who spends her time doing everything she can to avoid killing.

Some in our top 10 I've written about here before—our number nine is the fun and wise animated map of the emotions, **Inside Out**; eight is the immigrant tale **Brooklyn**; five is Brian Wilson mental illness and creativity biopic **Love & Mercy**; and four is the powerful investigative journalism drama **Spotlight**, a challenge to contemporary news media to once again pursue their higher calling to tell the truth for the common good. Here are the rest of our selections:

10. About Elly. Iranian filmmaker Asghar Farhadi made this film in 2009, and it has been acclaimed as heralding "a new genre," but it was not released in the U.S. until last year. Farhadi's magnificent,

compassionate dramas *A Separation* and *The Past* are more recent, but his ability to tell the most humane stories in the most gripping way was forged here.

7. Gett: The Trial of Viviane Amsalem.

This explores religion's shadow side in the context of a broken marriage in Israel and a husband who will not grant his wife's desperate wish for freedom.

6. The Look of Silence. The companion to documentary activist Joshua Oppenheimer's astonishing *The Act of Killing*, observing an optician confronting the men who killed his brother during the Indonesian genocide.

3. Timbuktu. A depiction of the interruption of quiet desert life by jihadists, Abderrahmane Sissako's film is the first-ever submission by Mauritania to the Best Foreign Language Film Academy Award category.

2. Stations of the Cross. A German film that has been called "among the most insightful and devastating cross-examinations of religious fundamentalism ... not an attack on faith ... but rather an examination of how faith goes wrong."

1. The Assassin. An utterly remarkable film, by which I mean every single scene, perhaps even every single moment, of Taiwanese master Hou Hsiao-hsien's work—it is imbued with beauty, compassion, and the strength to enact nonviolence. ■

Gareth Higgins is an Irish writer and the founder of moviesandmeaning.com.

and how it can tear churches apart. We only need think back to the exit of Rob Bell from Mars Hill Bible Church after the release of his bestselling book *Love Wins* in 2011. Indeed, Bell said he wrote the book after a congregant questioned whether Gandhi was in heaven. This isn't the first time church leaders have questioned the existence of a literal hell and rejected the doctrine. Schisms emerge and new church bodies are formed. In Hnath's rendition of this story, the melodrama of such church schisms is downplayed so that we can clearly hear the emerging argument. Pastor Paul, despite the abandonment of his congregation, stands resolved in his new faith: "I believe what I believe because I know it is true—but why do I know it's true?—it's a feeling. And where did that feeling come from?—God ... I know it's God because God is there."

And the question is left unresolved in the play, echoing how many of us feel when deeply held orthodox opinions are questioned. The play is clearly hitting home, with several productions scheduled across the country in the coming year. Hnath himself is not a Christian, yet he clearly understands

Paul, deeply disturbed by the missionary's conviction, can no longer believe in such a hell.

the world of the church (he was a member of an evangelical church in his past). The relevance of Hnath's story, told by his convincing characters in the language of now, points to the reality that many people hunger to be heard and for the space to share the truths that they feel.

We are in need of truth, as well as of people who resiliently stand by through periods of great change and tumult. Pastor Paul is such a man, a character who could become a hero for American Christians. ■

Stephanie Sandberg is a professor of theater at Calvin College, where she writes and directs. She is also the artistic director of ADAPT. Theatre Company in Grand Rapids, Mich.

Reviewed by Rosalie G. Riegler

LEADING WITH WISDOM

Joan Chittister: Her Journey From Certainty to Faith, by Tom Roberts. Orbis.

MANY KNOW Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister as a prophetic spiritual writer and an engaging speaker; others call to mind her sister-leadership, her feminism, and her defiance of the Vatican. What Tom Roberts' startling new biography uncovers, with the full cooperation of Sister Joan, are the horrors of a childhood filled with violence and poverty and the vivid details of her growth as a spokesperson for women's equality in the Catholic Church.

The book's three parts each deal with a phase in Chittister's spiritual growth. The early years, with harrowing accounts of protecting her mother from a brutal and alcoholic stepfather and entering an Erie Benedictine community still steeped in old-world traditions, conclude with Chittister receiving her Ph.D. from Penn State, a first for her order.

Part two chronicles the tumultuous middle years when religious communities everywhere were adapting to a radically changing world. Chittister grew in critical consciousness about the role of women in the church and served three terms as prioress of her order, helping her community to move from its traditional vocation of teaching to serving a changing neighborhood. Their projects, under the umbrella term of peacemaking, took the form of urban gardens, art workshops, afterschool programs, peace centers, houses of hospitality, and soup kitchens, and eventually to the formation of online communities of monastic spirituality. For those who haven't read Chittister's own writing on these years, Roberts could have included more information on pre-Vatican II convent life here.

Part three finds Chittister moving beyond the community of U.S. sisters to worldwide leadership, ably assisted by her lifelong friend Sister Maureen Tobin. Chittister traveled on peacemaking journeys to Palestine and Israel, worked in Haiti and the Philippines, and took part in several worldwide conferences, including the 1995 U.N. World

Conference on Women in Beijing and an ecumenical conference in Nairobi. All this while still plagued by the ravages of childhood polio!

In 2001, Chittister was invited to speak at the first international conference of Women's

Ordination Worldwide, to be held in Dublin. Vatican officials ordered her prioress, the late Christine Vladimiroff, to "forbid and prohibit" Chittister's participation. Roberts details the courage of Vladimiroff and the community as they collectively resisted the Vatican in support of Chittister.

When Chittister addressed the Dublin conference about discipleship, she asked "What do the people really need?" answering that "they need the sacred, not the sexist ... more prophets of equality, not more pretenders to a priesthood of male privilege. They need discipleship, not canonical decrees." In her assertion that Christian discipleship will, sooner or later, "tumble a person from the banquet tables ... to the most suspect margins of both church and society," she foreshadowed some of Pope Francis' wisdom. She begged that the question of women as priests be seriously considered in papal circles, lamenting that it had not yet happened. (It still has not yet happened.)

The biggest surprise in this book was to learn of Chittister's sense of insecurity, especially in one whose writing is so sure, so true. I had suspected I would find the hint of ego, necessary for someone who has faced what to many would be insurmountable odds, both in becoming a nun and weathering the storms of 63 years as an Erie Benedictine. But Chittister's continuous questioning, both of herself and her place in the world, is what has enabled her to grow and to teach us how to grow as well. It comes as balm to women and men who themselves struggle daily to keep their Christianity aflame in a world steeped in violence.

Roberts, editor at large of the *National*



Catholic Reporter, has crafted a compelling biography that concludes with his reflections on the position of women religious communities today and in the times to come. One sees in his final words an increasingly polarized Catholic Church in the U.S.—one that Sister Joan will continue to embrace because, as she says, “Women will call the church to truth. The church will call women to faith.” My hope is that Christians everywhere will continue to grow toward equality, with Chittister’s own growth and wisdom leading the way. ■

Rosalie G. Riegler, a retired professor of English, is a Benedictine oblate associated with St. Scholastica’s Monastery in Chicago. Her four oral histories include Dorothy Day: Portraits by Those Who Knew Her.

Reviewed by Greg Williams

CHANGE OR COMPLICITY

Asking for It: The Alarming Rise of Rape Culture—and What We Can Do About It, by Kate Harding. Da Capo Press.

IN THE COURSE of a few months in the past year, I learned that three women and men close to me had been sexually assaulted—as children and as adults. Hearing their stories broke me out of many of the lies surrounding rape that I had fallen into without even realizing it.

Kate Harding’s *Asking for It* attacks the same lies and misconceptions. She explores how we, as a culture, embrace myths surrounding rape and sexual assault. Theoretically, we think of rape as a terrible crime that takes away people’s right to choose what to do with their bodies—but practically we have trouble believing that it actually happens, or if it does that it is really that bad. We joke about rape, we believe it is caused by women acting like “sluts,” or act like the only kinds of rape that really matter are those in which a white woman is attacked by a brown man. We normalize assault and minimize it.

We have built a society and criminal justice system that protect abusers and place the responsibility on women to avoid being assaulted rather than on men to not attack.

Sadly, none of this is surprising, but Harding’s exploration of these familiar

truths is biting and unrelenting.

She is offensive at times, but about things we should be offended about. When I recoil at her describing a rape by saying he “put his dick in her,” I realize how much I should be disgusted by the assault itself. We can numb ourselves by using clinical language to talk about rape and sexual assault, but Harding refuses to give us distance from the violence of these attacks.

Harding suggests practical changes that we can make—such as educating our kids, reforming our criminal justice system, and changing our language. These practical measures consist of the minimum on which we all ought to agree: My conservative friends, together with my progressive ones, can agree that rape jokes are offensive, hurt people, and contribute to a society in which people are more easily hurt. As Harding notes, even when we have radically different ideas about the proper scope of sexual activity, we should all agree that clear consent is necessary for a healthy sexual relationship.

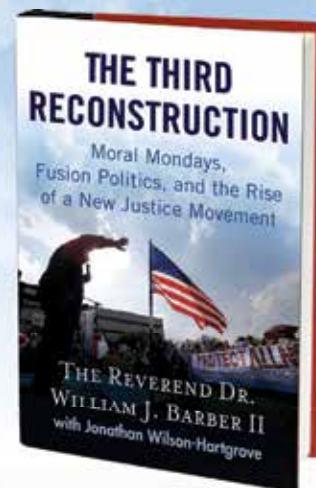
The Christian way to describe what Harding wants to encourage is repentance—recognizing hurt, asking forgiveness, and committing to corporate change. This may sound overly spiritualized and fuzzy, but it is the only real way to triumph over an ideology such as rape culture that hurts people daily. If we commit to changing our language, how we practice justice, and how we teach our kids, we can take the first steps to actually changing our hearts.

Rape is evil, and like all other evils it will linger until God’s reign is fulfilled. Still, we can build a society in which rape is not normalized, in which women aren’t ashamed to report an assault, in which consent is not presumed to be some mysterious smoke signal. We can build a culture that makes it easier to be good and harder to be evil. Even though this language may be alien to Harding, it is at the core of her demands.

We need change. Not just for the sake of the victims of sexual assault but for the women who have to guard themselves out of fear and the men who deserve to be held to a higher standard. We can do better, so we must repent. ■

Greg Williams is the communications director at an advocacy organization in Washington, D.C.

THE REVEREND DR. WILLIAM BARBER II & A NEW CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT



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author of *The UnCommon Good*

“This book lays bare his prophetic vision, historical analysis, and courageous praxis.”

—CORNEL WEST,
author of *Black Prophetic Fire*

“The Reverend William Barber knows what ails us and—what is rare in this day and age—he knows what to do about it.”

—THOMAS FRANK,
author of *Pity the Billionaire*

“Far more than a book, this is a daring call to get into the streets and be a part of the history making, as we interrupt the patterns of injustice and build a better world.”

—SHANE CLAIBORNE,
activist and author of *The Irresistible Revolution*



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From HBO's
The Leftovers



Reviewed by Juliet Vedral

ALL THAT REMAINS

The Leftovers, created by Damon Lindelof and Tom Perrotta. HBO.

I FIRST BEGAN watching *The Leftovers*, HBO's drama based on a novel of the same name by Tom Perrotta, when it debuted in the summer of 2014. Like many viewers, I was fascinated by the premise: On Oct. 14, 2011, 2 percent of the population suddenly disappears in a rapture-like event. The show begins three years after what is called the "Sudden Departure," and rather than explaining the metaphysical meaning of this mysterious event, it focuses on how the members of one family process their grief.

Throughout the show's first season, we're introduced to an array of characters who deal with the Sudden Departure in different ways. Some want to continue with life as it was on Oct. 13, 2011, before the world changed. Some are tortured by the mystery of the Departure and why they weren't "taken." Some seemingly well-adjusted people join the cults that have sprung up since the event. One group in particular has gained the most traction, the Guilty Remnant. The group exists to be "living reminders" of God's judgment; they make it their mission to make people remember, but offer no comfort. Another cult features a messianic leader who promises to absorb the pain of anyone who hugs him, but offers no spiritual

or intellectual balm for the hurt and confusion post-Departure.

The novel on which the show is based was written as a response to the way the world changed after Sept. 11, so it was particularly poignant that the attacks in Paris occurred as I watched the second season of *The Leftovers*. Certainly it's grievous to see violence occur anywhere, but as with Sept. 11, the attack on Paris brought with it a shocking cognitive dissonance: That kind of thing doesn't

Two percent of the population suddenly disappears in a rapture-like event.

happen in places like this—Western, cosmopolitan, relatively safe. Before the attack in Paris, before the Twin Towers fell, there was always the possibility that something tragic could occur on a random Friday night or Tuesday morning. But perhaps to many of us who live in relative comfort and ease, violence and tragedy are what happens to other people, in other places. It is this cognitive dissonance and the subsequent question of how to live in uncertain times that the second season of *The Leftovers* explores. It is also what makes it worth watching.

While this subject matter is not highly entertaining, and while the show features jarring scenes of sex and violence, it might be helpful to view *The Leftovers* in light of the gospel narrative. The Bible itself is a book that features many mysterious, unexplainable events and the stories of how dysfunctional families and their communities deal with all kinds of suffering and grief in the midst of jarring scenes of sex and violence. It is in these real-life settings that people of faith are reminded that this world can be far harsher than we would like to imagine and that we are in more need of God's grace than we'd like to think. Throughout scripture God comes to humanity in different ways to pull people out of their complacency and to offer help and redemption in the midst of the chaos of life.

It's these sweet moments of grace that occur in each episode of *The Leftovers* that stick with you far more than the sex or violence. Though *The Leftovers* often takes a low view of religion, it seems to look for and celebrate those gritty and real moments of hope that shine through in the midst of chaos and fear. As people of faith it would do us well in this uncertain world to look for, and celebrate them, too. ■

Juliet Vedral is a writer and church staffer living in Washington, D.C. She edits an online literary magazine, The Wheelhouse Review, and a devotional blog, Perissosblog.org. Season 2 of The Leftovers will be available on DVD/Blu-ray in early February.

CONFRONTED BY THE **TRUTH**

Shaka Senghor is a writer, mentor, motivational speaker, and former honor roll student—who was incarcerated 19 years for murder. Here he tells of a key turning point during his imprisonment.

MY SON WAS 10 YEARS OLD, and the sight of an envelope addressed in his squiggly handwriting filled my spirit with joy. But as I tore open the envelope and began reading, I saw that this letter was different from the ones he had sent before.

In the top right-hand corner, Li'l Jay had written in big, capital letters:

MY MOM TOLD ME WHY YOU'RE IN JAIL, BECAUSE OF MURDER! DON'T KILL DAD PLEASE THAT IS A SIN. JESUS WATCHES WHAT YOU DO. PRAY TO HIM.

I stared at the small paragraph for what felt like hours. My body trembled violently, and everything inside of me threatened to break in half. For the first time in my incarceration, I was hit with the truth that my son would grow up to see me as a murderer.

I don't know why I hadn't thought about it before. It's not that I was planning to hide my past from my son—it's just that I thought I would be able to sit down and explain it to him when I felt he was mature enough for the conversation. But as I read Li'l Jay's words, reality kicked me in the gut, and the pain of not knowing what to say spread through my body like cancer.

I didn't know the context of the conversation that he had with his mother, so I wasn't sure how to respond. The only thing I was sure of was that I had to do everything in my power to turn my life around. It was the only way I could show my son that I was not a monster.

His letter continued:

Dear daddy, I wonder how you're doing in there. I'm doing fine. When I think about you, it makes me feel sad with no daddy around to wake me up and go work out and be strong like you. I have to do it all by

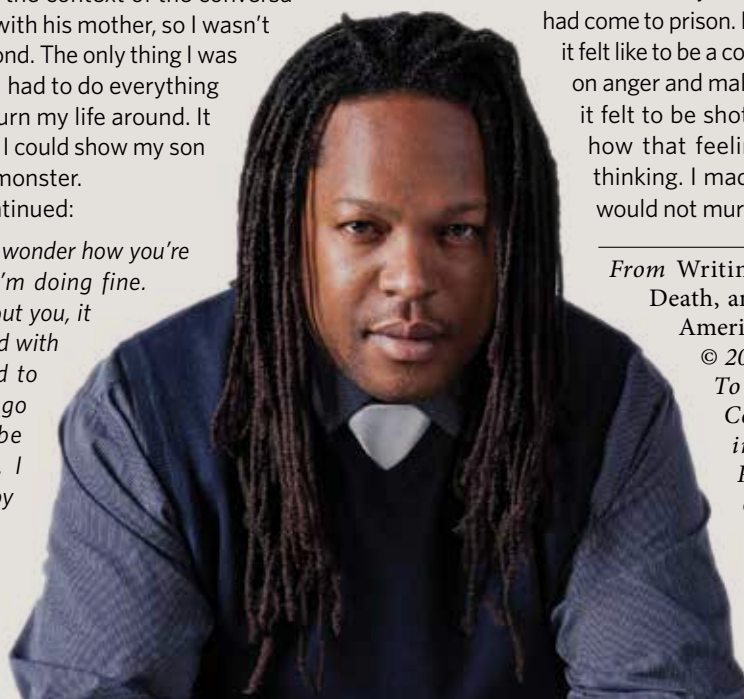
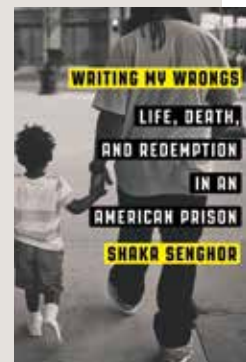
myself. It bothers me the way I miss you. I pray and pray one day my prayer may come true and we'll be together 4 life. It's the anger in my heart that hurts me most without a dad in the house. My mama said I am the man of the house. She tells me I have to take over the anger so I won't be in jail.

Each word seemed to scrape away the scar tissue that had formed around my heart. The words tore off my façade of 'hood toughness and prison savvy. My crime was no badge of honor in my son's eyes—it was a scarlet letter that signified how badly I had failed him and the other young black males in my neighborhood, many whom would die or spend their lives in prison for trying to emulate me.

When I finished reading, I was scared for Li'l Jay and all of the other young men who had fathers like me—fathers who were languishing away in prison cells while their sons grew up lost and angry. I had acknowledged my guilt years before, but there was a difference between that and accepting responsibility for my actions. My son's words made me take that final step on my road to redemption.

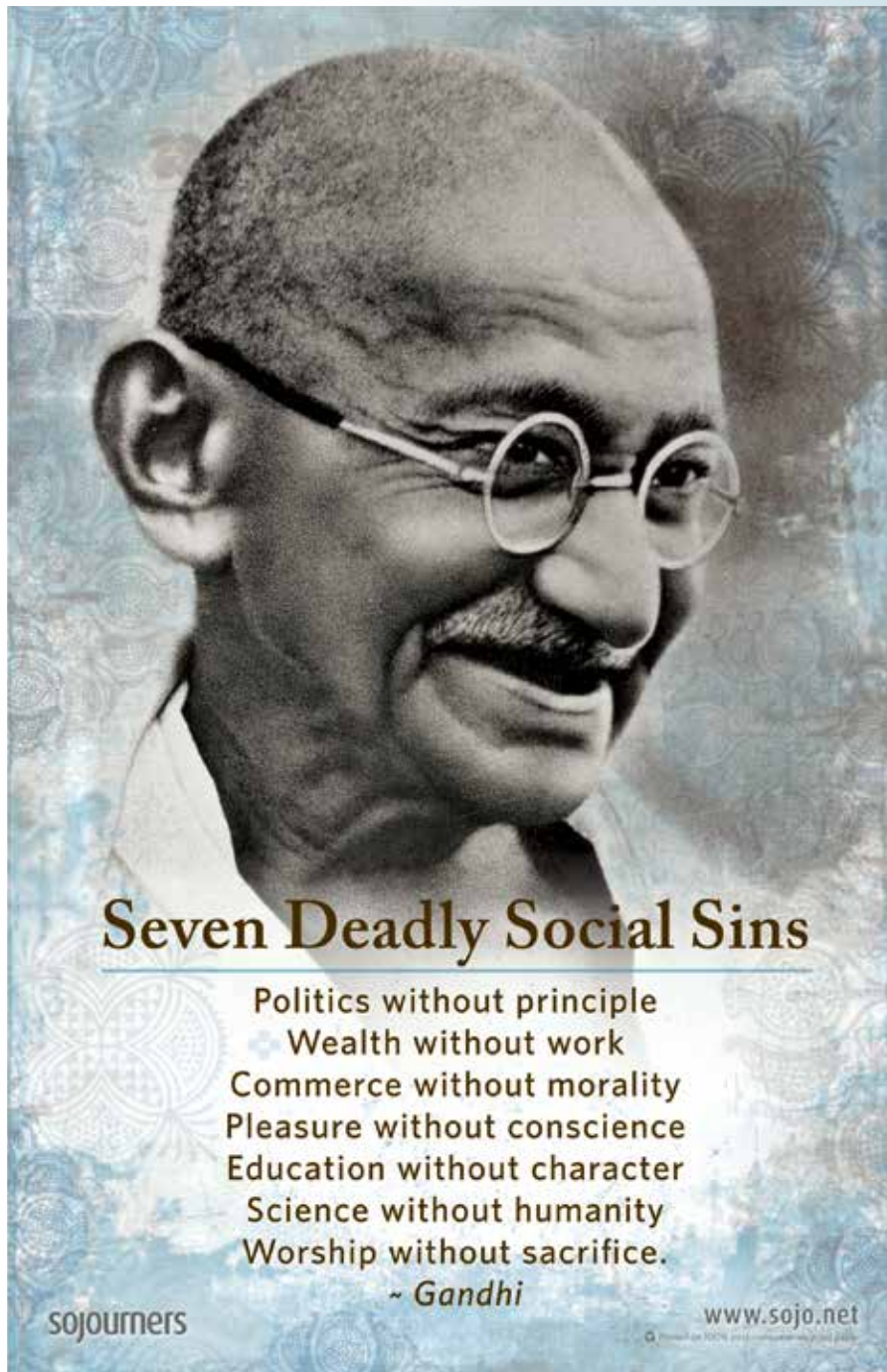
I sat his letter down and grabbed a pen. I owed my son the truth, but more than this, I owed him a father. Tears ran down my face as I began writing back. I told him the whole story. I explained how and why I had come to prison. I explained to him what it felt like to be a confused teenager, drunk on anger and malt liquor. I told him how it felt to be shot at the age of 17, and how that feeling had distorted my thinking. I made a vow to him that I would not murder again. ■

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Surgeon Nia Zalamea

Friends In Need

Nia Zalamea

Bio: *Nia Zalamea is a board-certified general surgeon. After five years in a traditional medical practice in rural Virginia, she joined the Church Health Center, an organization in Memphis, Tenn., that seeks to reclaim the biblical commitment to care for our bodies, minds, and spirit. She is one of two general surgeons in the U.S. who does full-time charitable work.*

1 Why did you leave traditional medical practice? I went into medicine to serve; it was the one craft and skillset I could offer to an individual in front of me. But after five years, I found out that I wasn't actually living my mission; I had put five people into bankruptcy. What I saw in rural America was that even one operation could completely derail not just one generation but multiple generations. Not just in terms of economics, but in terms of social capital, education, and everything we know that affects health and medical care.

2 What exactly does the Church Health Center do? The Church Health Center is a medical wellness home for the underserved, the uninsured, and the underinsured of Memphis. We provide surgery on a sliding scale; if someone can't afford the surgery, it gets written off. The hospital supports the surgery in not charging the hospital fee, which is a huge chunk of the cost. So it's not free, but the out-of-pocket cost for the patient is extremely low. We just make it affordable.

3 What are some of the barriers that prevent your patients from having access to health care? We have ongoing workshops during open enrollment to get people on to Affordable Care Act plans, but what is deemed "affordable" is not always affordable; the majority of my patients are

150 to 200 percent below the poverty line. Another barrier is access: Just because you have an insurance card doesn't mean the doctor will see you. And this is where a lot of the injustice lies; many doctors' offices and businesses have closed their doors to new Medicaid patients. Finally, the Affordable Care Act doesn't cover everyone; my patients include undocumented immigrants, refugees, and patients from other countries whose children are being treated nearby at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

4 What do you wish more Christians understood about health and health care? In the U.S., one of the falsities that we have created for ourselves is that health care equals health. But according to the guideline published by the World Health Organization, health also has to do with societal fulfillment and personal fulfillment. As a Christian, I would add spiritual fulfillment, or living the fullest life in conjunction with our Maker. As Christians, we have a responsibility to turn inward and think about relationships, supporting each other, social circumstances, bringing people out of unjust incarceration—things that aren't necessarily "health care," but they are definitely health.

5 How can Christians who are not in Memphis replicate the work the Church Health Center is doing? One of the things we're interested in at the Church Health Center is using innovation to design health care around the needs of the people we're serving. For example, Christians in Seattle might say, "We're going to initiate a program and do end-of-life planning for people who would not normally have access to that." That is a high need for poor, uninsured, and homeless people that is not being met. So there are a lot of different ways; it really just depends on what the needs are.

—Interview by Betsy Shirley

Between a Rock and Arising

THESE WEEKS ARE THE high point of the Christian year. They are also taxing for those who are preachers. The Sundays seem to come around every few minutes, while liturgies fly at you even faster during Holy Week. All the more important, then, to dine on the Word ourselves, before we feed others from what we're cooking. Thankfully, the church has set aside the richest texts we have to describe the mystery that is beyond describing—that God is in Christ reconciling the entire world. Often we can't even reconcile—piece together—our own lives! Let alone our families, churches, communities. Thankfully, we don't have to. God already has. Our work is announcing what's been completed and enjoying its fruits.

The liturgies of Lent, the Passion, and Holy Week are what seep deep into people's bones. Our words bring to light what God is *already* doing. Make use of these. Have worship on Wednesday to wash feet and on Maundy Thursday to join in Jesus' inauguration of the Lord's Supper. Do like the African-American church has done and invite people to gather for three hours on Good Friday to hear seven sermons. Gather like the Orthodox and the Catholics



at dawn on Easter, light a fire, and have folks process into church carrying the light of Christ and singing. It's a week of revival, as evangelicals put it. God isn't just resurrecting Jesus. God's stitching the church back together—and the universe too.

Jason Byassee holds the Butler chair in homiletics and biblical hermeneutics at the Vancouver School of Theology in British Columbia.

[MARCH 6]

Dereliction and Duty

Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

YOU COULD LIVE with each of these texts every moment left in your life and never exhaust them. They have an accent on forgiveness, grace, and celebration. This is already odd in Lent—a season in which, traditionally, we train ourselves not to say “hallelujah” so that it will ring out all the sweeter on Easter when our lips curl around its contours for the first time in weeks. Israel's disgrace is “rolled away,” as the word “Gilgal” announces (Joshua 5:9). Happy are we when our “sin is covered” (Psalm 32:1), when God is our hiding place. And Christ is reconciling every atom in the universe—and more miraculously still—entrusting us (us!) with God's ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5).

Luke 15 is more staggering still. It is often misnamed “the prodigal son.” But as Tim Keller and others have pointed out, it is the father who is most extravagant here. The father, as if he dies to himself, gives the younger son his inheritance. Then, when the younger son returns, the father celebrates with what is left (presumably cutting

into the elder's share). The younger son's depth of dissolution would have drawn a reflexive shudder from the story's first readers (Pigs! Akin to, say, roaches for us). And the elder son is just as lost as the younger—he just has a *better* strategy for getting the father's stuff by dutifully waiting for dad's death. Better, that is, until he runs headlong into his father's rule-transcending generosity.

How do we read it? Original readers might have heard the Jews' longtime faithfulness contrasted with gentiles' self-absorbed paganism, both overwhelmed in the father's grace. Sam Wells has read it with regard to Catholics' adherence to the church's creedal oneness and Protestants' dissolution into ever smaller groups who will get the Bible right *this* time. Karl Barth saw here Christ's journey into the far country of our Adam-like abandonment of God in order to restore us to grace. The frame of the story is so strong you can hang on it nearly any account of dereliction and resurrection. Do you know anything about those two realities?

[MARCH 13]

Memory of Joy

Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

RELIGIOUS PEOPLE are, by definition, those who remember. So when Isaiah tells you not to remember, don't believe him. What he means is that what God is about to do is so fantastic that even the Exodus will fade in its light.

When Paul tells you not to remember, don't believe him. Especially as he lays out his impressive résumé. None of it matters compared to God's résumé—that is, to what God has done for us undeserving people in Christ.

Better to listen when the psalmist says, indeed begs, that we remember. Remember what laughter was like? Now, all we have is tears. God, will you make us laugh again? That's as Lenten a prayer as we have. A memory of joy behind oceans of sadness, and a frail trust that God can make us smile again.

John's story is the one that most requires a careful memory. But first it requires a sensitive sense of smell. Pay close attention whenever the Bible engages a specific sense—in this case our nose. “The house was filled with the fragrance,” John says, as Mary dumps a year's wages in oil on her friend's feet. Feet! If we were planning the most appropriate way for Christ, “the anointed one,” to be anointed, we probably wouldn't imagine a private dinner, on his feet, in front of only a few friends. Emperors are anointed in public, by some worthy figure, with maximum public effect. This Christ is anointed among a few friends, a few detractors, in a gesture that seems awkward, budget-breakingly extravagant, and really, really smelly.

Judas' objection is what requires our memory. Deuteronomy makes clear that the poor's omnipresence demands our constant, creative self-giving to them (15:11). Those with no memory have made this an excuse for being closed-fisted.

God is anything but close-fisted. As Robert Jenson wrote, God raised Israel from Egypt and Christ from the dead. And God has a future so remarkable we won't even remember Exodus, we won't even remember resurrection. We'll only remember God and all God's beloved children. Doesn't that smell good?

[MARCH 20]

Cross-Shaped Cosmos

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16;
Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 23:1-49

I TOLD MY church in North Carolina once about friends in Sudan who said Jesus had forever marked the back of the donkey. I thought this would be an obscure reference that affirms the worldwide church. Instead, my farming parishioners smiled. Their donkeys also have crosses in the fur on their backs. Jesus is always closer than we think. The next year one of those cross-marked donkeys paraded in on Palm Sunday with the kids and the dancers and the Lord of the universe.

These texts are chock-full of signs. Philippians insists that the pattern of the cosmos is cross-shaped: We descend-to-ascend. God does not stay safe from the messes we've made. God comes unbearably close. Ever after Jesus, God has skin and eyelashes and a spleen and a Jewish mom. And God becomes a slave and dies. Not even hell is safe from the sound of praise. Down, down, down. So God super-exalts him, and every knee bows.

The Passion text from Luke should be read in its glorious entirety. And we should take time to point out the signs: Jesus is condemned so that unworthy Barabbas can go free. Simon of Cyrene carries a cross he hadn't planned on carrying for a Christ he hadn't planned on meeting. "He saved others; let him save himself," they say in mockery *while* the world is being saved by the one who won't save himself. And a man dying beside him, and a Roman centurion, recognize what the world's greatest legal system (Rome) and God's own chosen people mostly cannot see—that this one can save from death.

There is a saying attributed to St. Augustine: "Do not despair; one thief was saved. Do not presume; one thief was lost." This is a lot for the preacher—and parish—to hold in her hands, like Joseph of Arimathea once held the dead body of Christ in his. But in the economy of this God, dead things are constantly springing forth with life.

"Preaching the Word," Sojourners' online resource for sermon preparation and Bible study, is available at sojo.net/ptw.

[MARCH 27]

When Death Trembled

Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24;
1 Corinthians 15:19-26; Luke 24:1-12

"THESE WORDS seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them." If there's a day designed for our words not to fall on the ground, it's this day. On Easter, even normally empty churches are full—of people and lilies and hope. Musicians have brought their best. People who are not normally there to hear the good news are there, and might even hear!

But can we hear? That God raised Jesus and appointed him judge of all, both the living and the dead (Acts 10:42)? That the stone the builders rejected is now the cornerstone—and by implication, that God has gathered up all that is rejected and given it the place of honor (Psalm 118)? That Jesus' resurrection is so "bodily" that all those in bodies have reason to hope they will prosper and flourish (1 Corinthians 15:22)? That no tomb is safe (Luke 24) from the Lord of life whose resurrecting light irradiates every tomb and fills the world with light? There is enough here that we can understand why its first hearers turned away, cautioned against "idle tales." Our ears can't take this much light.

Preachers sometimes feel obligated to conjure up the best sermon of the year on this day when others are bringing their highest expectations. But the baseball player who swings for the fences usually misses; the player who just tries to make contact often gets a base hit. We shouldn't try to do too much. These texts can do plenty without us. They bear witness to a God whose life is not broken by death, but rather whose life *breaks* death.

Much of our life is absorbed with fear of death. We expensively defend ourselves from it with military, police, security. We work frantically to keep the wolves away. All of this is understandable—we live in a dangerous, fallen world. Yet these texts suggest it's really death that should tremble. Life is more nimble, more alive, more disruptive than death. After Jesus' resurrection, no tomb is safe. No domain is marked only by death. Life reigns. And nothing will be the same. ■

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'Give me a few of your tired, your poor...'

WITH THE GLOBAL refugee crisis worsening every day, thank goodness we've put the Christmas season behind us, what with its pesky reminders about welcoming the stranger, finding room for weary travelers, and great things coming from little poor kids. It got pretty uncomfortable there for a while.

To compensate, some of us even started altering our long-held perceptions with a critical eye, like maybe Joseph and Mary should have called ahead to reserve a room, or used Uber instead of that donkey, or at the very least packed better for the baby. Swaddling clothes just don't cut it as a lining for your standard manger, and straw is no substitute for a quilted blanket. I know for a fact that straw pokes uncomfortably through most fabrics, something I learned as a young boy who thought he could jump into some hay bales after being told not to, and then stood in front of his parents, covered in straw, and denied it. (On laundry day, mom cleared out the lint trap with a pitchfork.)

As a nation, it seems we lost some of our yuletide spirit this past season,



Ken Davis

be fair, their reluctance does comport with the nation's long-standing decree: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, after a two-year wait, a background check, a blood test, and a cavity search, yearning to be free of these several questionnaires which we'll process right after lunch." (It wouldn't all fit on the front of the Statue of Liberty, so it continues on the back. A lot of people miss that.)

Some religious leaders were acting more like King Herod when it came to welcoming the strangers. Jerry Falwell Jr., the president of Liberty University, might have been less than helpful when he said, "I've always thought that if more good people had concealed-carry permits, then we could end those Muslims

Gethsemane), but the Liberty head is in favor of his students carrying firearms to class.

Falwell didn't clarify if he wished his students to also be armed at athletic events with rival teams, although one assumes the tailgating revelry beforehand would only be enhanced by the presence of firearms. Nothing pumps up team spirit like firing handguns into the air over a parking lot.

REFUGEES TO OUR country have always experienced resistance, but they have persevered and brought new energy to our economy and our culture. There is a learning curve, to be sure, such as the idiosyncrasies of the English language that require an exclamation point after "Jeb Bush!" or that the Bible Belt is not something you wear but a place you should never drive through. And they should be taught not to watch television networks named after animals, which they'd mistakenly think are about the natural world.

It's true that newcomers might not be welcomed by the likes of Ted Cruz or Donald Trump—to save time, we just call them "The Crumps"—but most of America is happy to have the refugees here. Refugees are part of the human story, and we embrace them as our new neighbors and friends.

Because *somebody's* got to eat at Chipotle. ■

Ed Spivey Jr. is art director of Sojourners.

Refugees are good listeners. They're out of breath.

and I'm not just referring to the palpable lack of gratitude expressed by family members when unwrapping the gifts I had lovingly purchased at the Dollar Store. With almost 4 million refugees fleeing Syria, many of our political leaders responded in ways that seemed inappropriate. Maybe not as inappropriate as giving frankincense and myrrh to a poor newborn (a month's diaper service might have been the better choice), but surprisingly uncompassionate. The U.S. agreed to take only 10,000 of the refugees, less than 1 percent of the growing total, but even *that* was 100 percent too many for most Republican governors. To

before they walked in." Not exactly a Hallmark-card moment, but one probably missed by Muslim refugees who were, at that moment, trying to survive stormy seas in their escape to Greece. Even if they make it to the U.S., it's unlikely they would move to Falwell's home base of Lynchburg, Va., a town whose name suggests a certain lack of cordiality.

When he spoke forcefully as a Christian promoting the right to bear arms, Falwell did not specify the biblical principal he was basing it on (although I'm pretty sure Jesus was an excellent marksman, probably spending his weekends clearing out the groundhogs in the garden of



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